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DISCOURSES

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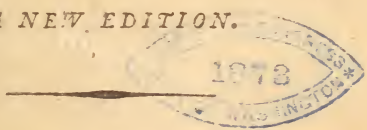
BY

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TAKE HEED HOW YE HEAR. Luke viii. 18.

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ADVERTISEM^T.

THE utility of a compendious view of a parable, in order to a clear understanding of its general import, and a right improvement of its several parts ; must strike every thoughtful person. This was the author's reason for prefixing so large a table of contents to the following plain discourses. The reader will, therefore, greatly oblige him by attentively looking over the contents, before he peruses the sermons.

CON-

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C O N T E N T S.

DISCOURSE I.

Of Parables in general; and the leading Ideas of this in particular.

MAT. xiii. 3.

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold a sower went forth to sow.

PART I.

Of Parables in general.

Occasion of the parable—meaning easy to be understood—how this reconcileable with our Lord's reason for addressing these people in parables—why he so frequently adopted this mode of instruction—rules to assist in interpreting the parables—temperate use of allegory highly proper—how abused by some public speakers—other abuses of preaching—causes of these evils—common apologies for them futile—pernicious tendency of injudicious treatment of allegory—as also of mere declamatory preaching—address to ministers.

PART II.

The leading Ideas of the Parable.

Our Saviour's grand object to draw the characters of four kinds of hearers---the INATTENTIVE---ENTHUSIASTIC---WORLDLY-MINDED---SINCERE---the leading ideas to be first of all explained---these are the *Sower*---*Seed*---*Ground*---*Effect*.

- I. By the *Sower* is meant ministers---their qualifications, duty, and various success, described.
- II. By the *Seed* is meant the *Word of the Kingdom* or gospel---*Kingdom* to be understood of personal religion, Christian dispensation, heavenly state---the *word* considered in reference to each of these.
- III. By the *Ground* is meant the soul of man---this, like the earth, in a different state now from what it was in the beginning---the natural and moral powers of the soul weakened and depraved---this confirmed by the different account our Lord gives of the several kinds of ground in which the seed was sown.
- IV. The general *Process* of the business expressed or implied in the parable---how religion rises into existence and becomes fruitful, through the concurrence of a divine influence, with the word dispensed by ministers, and the reasonings of the mind about it---Reflections on the subject.

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DISCOURSE II.

The Character of Inattentive Hearers considered.

MAT. xiii. 4.

And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way-side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured them up.

PART I.

FIRST, The INATTENTIVE.

The figure explained—our Saviour's exposition of it—in which the following things observable—they *hear* the word—are only *occasional* hearers of it—not *prepared* for hearing it—*hear it carelessly*—*understand it not*—or have only a *speculative knowledge* of it—it makes *no abiding impression*—how the impression effaced, *The wicked one cometh, and catcheth away that which was sown in their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.* Three things to be considered—who the wicked one is, and why so called---what meant by his catching away the seed, and how this done---what the malevolent end proposed.

- I. Who the *wicked one* is---*Satan* or the *Devil*---the Scripture account of him---from his character and works properly denominated the *wicked one*.
- II. What meant by his *catching away the seed*, and how this done---he hath access to the mind---this proved---but cannot force men to sin against their consent---righteous in God to permit him to catch away the seed from these hearers---this done,

I. By

1. By diverting men's attention from the word.
2. By exciting prejudices against it.
3. By preventing their recollecting it afterwards.

PART II.

III. What the malevolent end Satan proposes by catching away the word—*lest they should believe and be saved*—Here, in order to rouse men's attention, and to guard them against the artifices of Satan, it is necessary to enquire what *Faith* is—to describe the *Salvation* promised to them who believe—and to shew the *Connection* between the one and the other.

FIRST, What *Faith* is—the term defined, the qualities accompanying it described—the characters of the real and nominal believer contrasted.

SECOND, What the *Salvation* promised to them who believe---the most glorious---a deliverance from ---moral --natural---pcnal evil---with the enjoyment of the opposite good in its highest perfection.

THIRD, What the *Connection* between faith and salvation---its indispensable necessity arises---from the divine appointment---and the reason and nature of the thing.

Faith comes by hearing---hence the artifices of Satan to divert men's attention from the word, and to prevent its salutary effect upon their hearts---the awful consequences of impenitence and unbelief---Reflections on the subject.

DISCOURSE III.

The Character of Enthusiastic Hearers considered.

MAT. xiii. 5, 6.

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth. And when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had not root, they withered away.

PART I.

SECOND, The ENTHUSIASTIC.

On these hearers, the word, to appearance, hath an instantaneous and mighty effect, but they reap no real advantage from it---our Lord's exposition of this part of the parable---four things here to be considered---the character of these hearers, previous to their hearing the word---the effect it instantly produces on their minds---their failure afterwards---the cause of their apostasy.

- I. Their *Character* previous to their hearing the word ---their hearts compared to *stony* or *rocky ground*, on account of their depravity---their passions to the *fine mould* cast over it, on account of their warmth and liveliness---the ill effect of an heated imagination, under the conduct of a depraved heart, shewn ---the character of the enthusiast more particularly described.
- II. The *Effect* the word instantly produces on their minds, as described by our Saviour---they *receive* it---receive it *immediately*---receive it *with joy*---this passion

sion defined--the *joy* of the enthusiast distinguishable from that of the real Christian,

1. By what precedes it.
2. By what excites it.
3. By the effects of it.

Having thus received the word, he with great zeal professes it—but after a while apostatizes—addresses to persons of this character—a caution against supposing the passions have little or no concern in religion—the real but timorous Christian encouraged.

PART II.

III. The *Apostasy* of these hearers considered—the seed having sprung up, in a little time *withers away*—so these hearers having endured for a while *fall away*.

1. The *term* of their profession *short*--the real Christian advances by degrees towards perfection--these quickly arrive at the zenith of their glory.
2. The *manner* in which their profession is *renounced*—some silently quit it—others publicly renounce it.

IV. The *Cause* of their Apostasy.

1. Something wanted *within*---the seed had no *deepness of earth*---no *root*---lacked *moisture*---so these professors have no principle of religion in their hearts.
2. A concurrence of circumstances *without*, unfavourable to their profession—the scorching *sun burns up the grass*---so *persecution or tribulation arising, because of the word, they are offended*---the state of religion, as to external things.

things, in early and present times---various occasions of offence.

Examples of such Apostates---the five thousand our Saviour fed with loaves and fishes---the men of Nazareth---the Jews who led him triumphantly into Jerusalem, and a day or two after crucified him---the Laodiceans---digression on Enthusiasm---not the offspring of religion, but of a particular cast of mind, or temperature of animal spirits---common to men of all professions---Reflections on the subject.

DISCOURSE IV.

The Character of Worldly-minded Hearers considered.

MAT. xiii. 7.

And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up and choaked them.

PART I.

THIRD, The WORLDLY-MINDED.

The figure explained---our Lord's exposition of it; in which are observable, 1. The treatment the word meets with---they *hear* it---*receive* it---but *bring no fruit to perfection*. 2. How its salutary operation is obstructed---they *go forth*---*the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things, enter in*---they become *unfruitful*. 3. The event---the thorns *choke* both the word and them.

1. The obstructions themselves considered---*Cares*---*Riches*---*pleasures*.

FIRST,

FIRST, *Cares* of the world---how far sinful or otherwise---this shewn by considering men's temporal interests in reference to---subsistence---competence---affluence.

SECOND, *Riches*---their deceitfulness---men reason mistakenly about---wealth itself---mode of acquiring it---terms of enjoying it.

THIRD, *Pleasures* pleasure abstractedly considered a real good---when criminal---worldly pleasures various and fascinating.

Address to the---Careful---Covetous---Voluptuous.

PART II.

II. How cares, riches and pleasures operate to prevent the salutary effect of God's word---no profiting by the word without considering it---three things necessary to consideration---*Leisure*---*Composure*---*Inclination*.

FIRST, *Leisure*---ground choaked with thorns affords not room for the seed to expand and grow ---so secular affairs deprive men of time for religious meditation---time an inestimable gift---a proper portion of it ought to be employed about religion.

SECOND, *Composure* --the necessity of this to consideration---how an undue attention to worldly things unfits the mind for the practice of this duty---this shewn in regard---of anxious cares ---eager desire of riches---vehement thirst after pleasures.

THIRD, *Inclination*---total aversion to religious consideration in bad men---too often a backwardness to it in good men---the former confirmed,

firm'd, and the latter promoted, by an undue attachment to the world.

III. The sad event of such criminal commerce with the world---these hearers---*understand not* the word ---*do not believe* it---*are not obedient* to it---and so, like the seed *choked* by thorns, are in the end lost--- Exhortations to professors of religion.

DISCOURSE V.

The Character of Sincere Hearers Consider'd.

MAT. xiii. 8.

But other seeds fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundred fold, some sixty fold, some thirty fold.

PART I.

FOURTH, The SINCERE.

The figure explained---our Saviour's exposition of it--- these hearers have *honest and good hearts*---bear the word *after a different manner* from the others--- *understand* it---*keep* it---*bring forth fruit*---*with patience*---but *in different degrees*---Here propos'd--- to shew the necessity of the heart's being made honest and good, in order to profiting---describe the fruit which such bear---consider the variety in regard of degree and reasons of it---represent the blessedness of such persons.

I. The *necessity of the heart's being made honest and good*---will and affections have a considerable influence on the understanding and judgment---gospel humiliating to pride and disgusting to passion for

- worldly pleasure—hence opposition to it—a new turn being given to the mind, it will be received in the love of it—the importance of regeneration.
- II. The *kind of fruit such bring forth* described—fruit the ground bears of the same nature with the seed and the soil—nature and tendency of the gospel considered—what kind of man the Christian is, in regard of—piety—social—personal duties—no absolute perfection—yet a real difference between a good man and a man of the world—Reflections.

PART II.

- III. The *variety* there is among Christians in regard of *degrees of fruitfulness* and the *reasons* of it.
- FIRST, The *fact* stated—fruitfulness considered in regard of inward affections and external actions—various characters among good men described—various appearances of religion at different periods of life—scripture characters compared.
- SECOND, The *reasons* of this disparity in respect of the fruits of holiness—worldly circumstances—opportunity—mental abilities—different means of religion—comparative different state of it in one Christian and another—greater or less effusion of divine influences.
- IV. *Blessedness of the fruitful Christian*—the pleasure that accompanies ingenuous obedience—fruitfulness affords a noble proof of uprightness—such held in great esteem by the wise and good—glorious will be their reward in another world.

DISCOURSE VI.

The Duty of Consideration explained and enforced.

MAT. xiii. 9.

Who bath ears to hear, let him hear.

PART I.

The Duty explained.

By this mode of expression our Lord meant to convey the following ideas—that the discourse he had been delivering was parabolical—that the truth veiled under the parable was most important—that their considering it was necessary to their profiting by it—and that, if they were not benefited, the fault would be in their will, not their understanding—Consider the duty men owe to the word—Enforce it.

I. Consider *the duty our Lord inculcates*—to give energy to what they say, ministers should remind themselves of their duty—if they would be heard, they should—well understand their subject—be careful about their manner—look well to their aims and views---and depend upon the Holy Spirit for success. ---What the duty of the people---

FIRST, Some kind of preparation previous to hearing the word---especially on the day devoted to public worship---composure---soliloquy---prayer.

SECOND, How to behave in the house of God---early attendance---decency---attention to the preacher---guard against prejudice.

THIRD,

THIRD, Duty afterwards---Recollection---to assist herein three expedients recommended.

1. Avoid as much as possible what may tend to dissipate the mind, and render it incapable of recollection.
2. Be not fond of hearing more than you can retain and digest.
3. Make a point of retiring for the purpose of recollection and prayer.

PART II.

The Duty enforced.

II. *Enforce the duty with suitable motives.*

FIRST, *Decency*---good manners require our paying attention to those who speak to us---especially in a set discourse---it is an affront therefore to good sense and decorum, not to listen to those on whose instruction we profess to attend.

SECOND, *Personal obligation*---the anxiety of a friend for our good, a strong reason why we should regard him---Ministers our friends---neither credulous nor self-interested men---their anxieties and labours an argument to engage attention.

THIRD, *Preaching a divine institution*---artful men have taken advantage of this idea to impose upon mankind---preaching proved to be of divine appointment---how we may know who are called to preach---argument thence to persuade to consideration.

FOURTH, *Subject most worthy of attention*---Truth and importance always give energy to a discourse---religion shewn to be most important---and true---the admitting the possibility of these two positions a
reason

reason for consideration--the apostles reasoning on this matter.

FIFTH, *No profiting without considering*--a discourse not understood, believed, or felt, can do us no good--it must be heard and considered to these ends--doctrine of divine influence an incitement to consideration.

SIXTH, *Many obstructions* in the way of consideration---this our Lord shews in the parable---satan---a depraved heart---the world---this formidable confederacy an argument to excite diligence on our part.

SEVENTH, *Command of God*---so great a Being ought to be obeyed---the voice of reason, scripture and ministers, all uniting to persuade us to consideration, the voice of God---wilful opposition to him the greatest sin and deserving of greatest punishment.

EIGHTH, *Benefits resulting from consideration*---objections answered---“Consideration, if not impracticable, yet painful, laborious business”---“I may be convinced of what I don't care to believe”---“if converted, must give up many enjoyments”---advantages attending religion---in this life---the future---Sum of the argument---Address to hearers.

DISCOURSE I.

OF PARABLES IN GENERAL, AND THE LEADING
IDEAS OF THIS IN PARTICULAR.

MAT. xiii. 3,—9.

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold a sower went forth to sow. And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way-side, and the fowls came and devoured them up. Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth. And when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had not root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprung up and choked them. But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundred fold, some sixty fold, some thirty fold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

OUR divine Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, possessed the qualifications of a prophet, in their highest perfection. No one ever taught like him: he spake with authority, not as the scribes. Sensible, however, that his instructions could have no salutary effect,

effect, unless duly received, he earnestly exhorted the multitude who attended his ministry, to take heed how they heard. And to assist them in this great duty, he lays open, in the parable before us, the principles, motives, and conduct of the various sorts of persons who hear the gospel.

Our Saviour was constant and unwearied in the discharge of the duties of his prophetic character. On the morning of the day this parable was delivered, he had reprov'd the scribes and pharisees for their hypocrisy, warning them of the tremendous consequences it would draw after it. And having retired for a while to a house for some refreshment, he went down to the sea of Galilee; and there entering into a ship, sat on the side of it, and from thence discoursed to a great multitude, gathered together on the shore to hear him. They were plain country people, and so, it is probable, well acquainted with husbandry. He therefore talks to them in their own language, presenting them with divine truth in a form easy to be understood, and adapted to please.

But here a difficulty occurs, which will require a little consideration. The disciples, when our Lord had finished his discourse, ask him why he spake to the people in parables. He replies*, quoting a passage from Isaiah †, "Because seeing, they see not; and hearing, they hear not, neither do they understand." From whence it should seem, that our Lord himself considered the form of speech he had used as obscure, and that he adopted it in displeasure at their unreasonable stupidity and unbelief. And how is this to be reconciled with our idea of the parable, as easy to be understood, and adapted to please? I answer. This
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* Ver. 13.

† Chap. vi. 9.

mode of instruction is certainly natural and proper. We often introduce similies into our discourse, to explain and illustrate what could not otherwise be so clearly comprehended. But then, if a parabolical relation be given, without any intimation of the matter to which it is to be applied, it must be uninteresting, and the intention of the speaker remain obscure. Now it is admitted, our Lord did not, in so many words, declare what was the point he had in view. Yet, had his hearers been attentive, and made a proper use of their reason, they could not have been at a loss to apprehend in general his meaning. It was not probable, that one who claimed the character of a prophet, and had wrought so many miracles before their eyes, should have nothing farther in view, than to amuse them with a tale of what often happens to husbandmen in sowing their ground. On the contrary, it was reasonable for them to conclude, from his discourse previous to this, from the woes he had denounced upon their leaders for their inattention and unbelief, and from what he added at the close of the parable, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear:" I say, it was most reasonable for them to conclude from hence, that he meant to hold up to their view moral and divine truth. Which being the case, how natural for them to suppose, that by the sower's sowing seed, was meant our Saviour's instructing men in the great concerns of religion, and by the effect of the seeds being sown, the various influence of his instructions upon their minds! It is also further to be observed, that our Lord's putting the question to his disciples, "Know ye not this parable?" plainly intimates, that whatever obscurity there was in the parable, it was possible for *them* to understand the general meaning of it: and therefore,

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if it had not been for the depravity of these peoples' hearts, it would have been possible for them also to understand it. But although a further explanation of it was necessary, his forbearing to give it was but a just expression of his displeasure at their treatment of the plain truths he had delivered to them on the morning of that day: and so they were naturally led to read their crime in their punishment. Upon the whole, therefore, it must be acknowledged, the general intent of the parable being apprehended, that the method our Saviour took to lay open the characters of his hearers, was most fit, natural, and easy.

Here it will be proper to enquire more particularly into the grounds and reasons of this mode of instruction, that we may be enabled to account for our Saviour's frequent use of parables, that we may be assisted in the interpreting them, and that we may be guarded against the wanton abuse of allegory, too common among some people in discourses on religious subjects.

The word *Parable*, as appears from its derivation, signifies a similitude or comparison. — It is sometimes applied to an apologue or fable, that is, a story contrived to teach some moral truth: and sometimes it is put for a proverb, which is a parabolical representation comprised in a short sentence. This mode of instruction is familiar and pleasant. Sensible objects may very properly be considered as images of spiritual and invisible things; and by this use of them we are assisted in our conceptions and reasonings about matters, of which we should otherwise have scarce any idea at all. By substituting one person in the room of another, or by relating a story apposite to our purpose, we are enabled to place certain characters and actions in a striking

striking point of light, and to treat them with a freedom which in a plain direct address would scarcely be reconcileable with prudence and delicacy. The advantages accruing from this mode of instruction, wisely managed, are so considerable that it has obtained by universal consent in all ages. It was used by the ancient prophets, the eastern sages, and the Jewish doctors. And it is obvious that our Saviour had various inducements to this practice. Beside the consideration that it added beauty and vigour to his discourses, and rendered them more agreeable to a people accustomed to this manner of speaking, it enabled him to throw a veil over some things which it was not fit to declare in express terms. Many events were to take place which, in the ordinary course of things, would have been obstructed, had our Lord openly and plainly foretold them; such as, his being put to death by the Jews, the destruction of their polity and worship, and the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles. And then as to the peculiar doctrines of Christianity, the full explanation of them being reserved for wise purposes to the preaching of the apostles, this parabolical mode of instruction was the fittest to convey that degree of light concerning them, which was judged most proper during the term of our Saviour's own personal ministry. Hence he tells his disciples, a little before his last sufferings, "These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs (or parables): the time cometh when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs; but I shall shew you plainly of the Father *."

From what has been said then, we clearly see why our Saviour so generally taught the people in parables.

Now, as the parables were intended for our instruction,

* John xvi. 25.

tion, as well as theirs to whom they were first delivered, it is of importance that we, as well as they, rightly understand them. To this end give me leave to lay down two or three rules to assist us in the interpretation of them.

1. The first and principal one I shall mention is, the carefully attending to the occasion of them.

No one, for instance, can be at a loss to explain the parable of the prodigal son, who considers that our Lord had been discoursing with publicans and sinners, and that the proud and self-righteous Pharisees had taken offence at his conduct. With this key we are let into the true secret of this beautiful parable, and cannot mistake in our comment upon it. With inimitable softness and compassion our Saviour encourages the hopes of the penitent sinner, by describing the tender pity of a venerable parent towards an undutiful child. And with admirable address he reproves the invidious temper of pharisaical professors, by representing the jealousy and disgust of the elder brother at the kind reception the younger met with.—Understanding thus from the occasion of the parable what is the grand truth or duty meant to be inculcated,

2. Our attention should be steadily fixed to that object.

If we suffer ourselves to be diverted from it by dwelling too minutely upon the circumstances of the parable, the end proposed by him who spake it will be defeated, and the whole involved in obscurity. For it is much the same here as in considering a fine painting; a comprehensive view of the whole will have a happy and striking effect, but that effect will not be felt, if the eye is held to detached parts of the picture without regarding the relation they bear to the rest.

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Were a man to spend a whole hour on the circumstances of the ring and the robe in the parable just referred to, or on the two mites in that of the good Samaritan, it is highly probable both he and his hearers, by the time they got to the close of the discourse, would lose all idea of our Saviour's more immediate intent in both those instructive parables. And it should be further observed, that the dwelling thus tediously upon the mere circumstances of a parable, sometimes proves a temptation to obtrude on the hearer such fanciful interpretations of them, as have no warrant for them either in reason or Scripture. Which leads me to add,

3. That great caution should be observed in our reasoning from the parables to the peculiar doctrines of Christianity.

The principal or leading idea of a parable is, I admit, a sufficient ground on which to establish a doctrine; but this is not always the case with a detached part of it. In discourses of this nature, circumstances must be introduced to make up the story, and to give consistency and harmony to it: but there is no reason in supposing that a mystery is couched under each of these circumstances. The parable of Dives and Lazarus clearly proves, in my opinion, the existence of a separate state, since, if this be not admitted, I am at a loss how to give a consistent meaning to it, and under the necessity of supposing that our Lord countenanced a popular notion which had no foundation in truth. But, on the contrary, were I, upon the mere circumstance of Dives's expressing a concern that his brethren came not into that place of torment, to establish such a position as this, that there is benevolence among damned spirits, I should reason very improperly.

ly. I mean not however by this to say, that no attention is to be paid to what may be called the teints or colouring of a parable. Lights and shades have their effect, and our Lord might intend, by relating little incidents, yea even by the very turn of an expression, to convey some useful lesson to the mind. But then, as we should be on our guard that we are not diverted from the grand object by these matters, so we should take heed how we raise upon them a superstructure which they are not able to support. Such imprudent treatment of the parables by inconsiderate people has contributed not a little to scepticism, and created doubts in some minds, whether doctrines thus unskilfully defended, have any other foundation than in mere imagination.

And now, from what has been said, we see, in general, the importance of carefully guarding against an intemperate use of figure and allegory, in discourses on moral and religious subjects. But this is a matter that requires a little further consideration.

We have already admitted that a figurative mode of speech is allowable, and sometimes absolutely necessary. Our ideas, most of them, originate from sensation. By comparing the various orders of material beings with one another, we come to understand their distinguishing properties: and by comparing the objects of faith with those of sense, if the analogy is properly observed, we are assisted in our reasoning about them. And every one is sensible how much a discourse is embellished and enlivened by figurative language. We mean not, therefore, to condemn the use of metaphors and similitudes, but only to correct the abuse of them. And what occasion there is for an attempt of this kind none can be ignorant, who consider
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the manner in which public preaching is conducted in many popular assemblies.

It is lamentable to think what multitudes of weak people are imposed upon in this way. Their imagination is amused, and their passions excited, at the expense of their understanding and judgment, which are miserably trifled with, and too often grossly perverted. Figures we shall hear applied to what they bear no resemblance to, or at most but a very obscure and imperfect one. Metaphors of the lowest kind, if not indecent, we shall hear poured out in great abundance; a whole discourse filled with them, and sometimes a favourite one twisted and turned to any, or every purpose, without sense or reason. The doctrine of types shall be treated with the greatest freedom, as if no bounds were to be affixed to a wild imagination, and the preacher were at liberty to impose his own conceits on all the circumstances of the Jewish ritual. That shall be made a type which is none, and where there is one, it shall be stretched beyond its true meaning. The very outlines of a shadow shall become the foundation of some important doctrine. Scripture histories shall be converted into allegories, the common actions and intercourses of the patriarchs and others assume the air of mystery, and even the geography of the Old Testament have a spiritual meaning given it. And thus the Bible shall be made to say, in an infinite variety of forms, what no man of common sense can believe it ever meant to say.

And now we are upon the subject of public preaching, it may not be amiss to add, that this mystical treatment of Scripture is not the only evil we have to complain of. The pulpit is too often disgraced with a kind of language, action, and manner of address, bet-

ter suited to the familiarity of the market or fire-side, yea, in some instances, to the drollery of the stage, than the gravity of a Christian assembly. Sermons shall become vehicles, not only of trifling puerilities, quaint conceits, and phantastic allusions, but of idle stories, some true and some false. At every step the preacher advances, you shall have some image held up to view, taken from common life, dressed in an antic form, and adapted as it should seem rather to disturb than to excite devotion. Or if this be not his aim, but on the contrary his object is to make some truth or duty familiar to his hearers, yet the means defeat the end: for the substance is lost amidst the people's attention to the shadow, and so much time is taken up about the images of things, that little is left to investigate the real nature of the things themselves.

Now one cannot help wondering what should induce men who have any pretensions to sense or seriousness, to adopt a mode of preaching so trifling, indecent, and pernicious. Charity forbids our supposing that they mean to burlesque religion: if, however, they did, they could not take more effectual measures to that end. But we will rather impute the evil to less offensive causes, such as indolence, a fondness for popularity, or a wild conceit, that by these means they shall be likely to allure people to the consideration of divine things.

That this is an easy mode of preaching, and requires no great labour or ingenuity, is not to be doubted. A man of a slender capacity, with a little natural elocution, and a good deal of courage, may easily enough descant for a while upon this or that trite metaphor, making its several qualities stand for something he has no clear idea of, and knows not how to express

express in plain language; especially if he has the talent of digressing when occasion requires, and of mingling with his discourse a variety of tales, some ludicrous, and others serious. And thus possessed of the art of preaching, pray why should he throw away his time in laborious researches into nature, the word of God, and his own heart? Why should he spend his days and nights in close thought, diligent reading, severe enquiry, and a constant succession of painful exertions? Truly if this mode of preaching were agreeable either to common sense or Scripture, he would be justified in forbearing such labour. But as this is not the case, it would surely be more for his own and the people's advantage, if he were less solicitous about his ease, and applied himself with greater anxiety to his duty. It is the plain language of the Bible, "Give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine *." Study to shew thyself approved unto God, "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth †." Labour to get at the grounds and reasons of things; to explore their nature, uses and effects; to state clearly the difference between good and evil; and thus to lead men step by step to the knowledge of God, Christ, themselves, their interest, duty, and final state.

But it will be said, "An allegorical declamatory kind of preaching, is most pleasing to the common people: and what harm is there in a man's wishing to be popular?" It is indeed to be feared, too many hearers are more pleased with sounds than sense, with the shadow than the substance, the false glare of a bold image, than the striking energy of truth. They are more disposed to take things for granted, on the

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* 1 Tim. iv. 13.

† 2 Tim. ii. 15.

bold assertion of the preacher, than to enquire into the grounds upon which they stand. They feel no weariness in hearing a loose, unconnected, unmeaning harangue, but their spirits are quickly jaded by an attention to close reasoning. In short, so their fancy is pleased, and their passions moved, they care not what becomes of their understanding and judgment. This, I say, is the character of too many hearers. But must we accommodate ourselves to such a depraved taste, in order to draw the multitude after us? Is this manly? Is this honest? Is this treating either them or ourselves as we ought? Should we not rather take pains to correct their taste, and to convince them that religion is not a matter of amusement, but of the most serious consideration?

But you will say, "We mean to do them good, and what some consider as mere arts of persuasion may yet, if well timed, have a good effect. The taking men in their own way, adopting their familiar language, surprising them now and then with a bold figure, a sudden turn of thought, a sally of wit, a pleasant tale, or a group of frightful images; all this may succeed and catch their attention, excite their passions, and so gain their good will." True, they may. But having got your point, what good have you done them? If the business is to stop here, no time being left for the sober discussion of some important truth, and a serious address to the conscience, how is the great end of preaching answered? Your audience is neither wiser nor better. And the great mischief is, too many mistake the pleasurable or painful feelings, which are the mere mechanical effect of your thus practising on their ears and their imagination, for religious impressions. They have been amu-
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fed and delighted, or surpris'd and set a wondering, and so instantly conclude they are converted. I am not objecting against an easy pleasant delivery, occasional sallies of imagination, or a temperate use of metaphors; nor am I pleading for a dull, scholastic, systematical treatment of divine truth. But the former extreme is, I think, far more dangerous than the latter, as we shall presently shew.

“ Well but,” say you, “ Is not an allegorical mode of preaching scriptural? Did not the prophets, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself, deal much in parables?” True, they did. Nor are we forbid the use of similitudes; they are, on many occasions, highly proper and useful. And if you manage them to advantage, and in the manner the inspired writers did, you will find this mode of preaching to be of all others the most difficult. A sensible, judicious, profitable treatment of a parable or figure, will cost you a great deal of previous thought and study. Nor do I know a better expedient to deter a wild allegorist from the extravagance we have been exclaiming against, than to oblige him to spend a few hours in adjusting, if he can, all the circumstances of a parable, so as that it shall agree with itself, and carry clear conviction on the minds of plain hearers. The parables which occur in sacred writ, and particularly those of our Saviour, are most clear, beautiful and striking. Their excellence lies in the happy union you here see between wisdom and simplicity. Preach after this manner, and all wise and good men will wish you God-speed. But I should here again remind you, of what was observed in the beginning of this discourse, that our Lord had particular reasons for speaking so frequently in parables, and that after his ascension, when
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the veil was taken off the peculiar doctrines of Christianity, another mode of instruction took place. The apostles, wherever they came, held up the truth in its most plain and simple form, represented things as they were, entering into their nature, qualities, connections and evidence, with no other assistance from figure and allegory, than was absolutely necessary. If this fact were duly weighed, I think it would check the luxuriance of some good mens' imagination in this way, and bring them back to the standard of preaching in the New Testament.

With respect to those other liberties in preaching we have complained of, you will be apt to say, "Did not the prophets 'cry aloud and not spare,' and 'lift up their voice like a trumpet *?' Did they not 'smite with their hands, and stamp with their feet †?' and 'use many gestures and words, adapted to express the violent emotion of their own minds, and to excite similar feelings in their hearers? Did not our Saviour, in the last and great day of the feast, 'stand and cry ‡?' and was there not a remarkable vehemence in the apostle Paul's manner of preaching?" All this is true. But it does by no means warrant what is indecent and unnatural, or indeed the expressing any earnestness at all, when nothing worth hearing is spoken. But admitting that there was something allegorical in the tone, gesture, and actions of the ancient prophets, as well as in their discourses themselves, and which might be justified by the peculiarity of the occasion, and the extraordinary impulse they were under, it does not follow, that their manner is to be imitated by us. And I am sure that there is not a single instance to be produced, from the New Testament,

* Isa. lviii. 1. † Ezek. vi. 11. ‡ John vii. 37.

Testament, of any thing like those extravagancies we protest against. Our Lord "stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." There was nothing in his language and manner but was natural, and well agreed with the importance of his subject. And he was so far from being loud and vociferous, that it was prophesied of him, "He shall not strive, nor cry, neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets *." And as to the apostle Paul, let his history be soberly read, and you will be convinced that his zeal, which was very warm, never got the better of his reason, so as to transport him into any of those gross indecencies we complain of.

And now there remains only one thing more to be noticed, which we hear sometimes urged by weak people, as an excuse for the indiscreet liberties we wish to correct; and that is, that "this eccentric mode of preaching has been owned for the awakening and converting sinners." But before this argument can have any force, the fact itself should be fully established. Many have been supposed to be converted, whose after conduct has furnished sad proof to the contrary. Convictions have been mistaken for conversion, and a fit of warm enthusiastic zeal, attended with a temporary external reformation, has been deemed sufficient evidence of a renovation of heart. And thus a supposed fact, or what is rather wished than proved to be a fact, is instantly considered as an incontestible proof of the divine approbation of such preaching. But even admitting the fact, the inference by no means follows. Very unworthy characters have been instruments of great good, and the unjustifiable extravagancies of weak and inconsiderate men have been overruled

* Mat. xii. 19. compared with Isa. xlii. 2.

overruled by divine Providence, in some instances, to very salutary purposes: There were those in the apostle's time who preached the gospel of strife and envy, and to add affliction to his bonds. And so disinterested was that great and good man, that he tells us, he nevertheless rejoiced and would rejoice: thereby clearly intimating, that bad as these men's motives were, and improper as their manner might be of preaching the gospel, good might yet arise out of it. But surely the apostle did not mean to commend either their principles or mode of proceeding*. The truth is, having made up our mind upon the question what is right, or in other words, what is agreeable to sound sense and the word of God, it is our duty with all decency and steadiness to oppose the contrary, be the possible consequences thereof what they may. It is not the saying that foolish and extravagant preaching has been the occasion of real good to this or that man, that will justify such preaching. A few possible instances of this sort, may indeed console our minds under the evil we are lamenting, but they will not, if we are wise and good men, reconcile us to it.

Having thus seen, how it is men fall into this very improper and unnatural mode of discoursing of the great things of God, it is time to proceed to the main business, which is to point out the pernicious tendency of it. Here let me first speak of allegorical, and then of declamatory preaching.

As to the former, permit me again to observe that I do not mean to lay figures, comparisons, and similitudes under an interdict: they have their use if managed with discretion and moderation. But a failure here is an occasion of many great evils.---An intemperate

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* Philip. i. 15--18.

ate use of figures tends to sensualize the mind and deprave the taste---the misapplication of them gives a false idea of the objects they are meant to represent—and the reasoning injudiciously from them begets a kind of faith that is precarious and ineffectual.

1. An intemperate use of figures tends to sensualize the mind and deprave the taste.

We complain, and very justly, that sensible objects engross the attention of mankind, and have an undue influence on their appetites and passions. They walk by sight not by faith. They look to the things which are seen and are temporal, and not to those which are unseen and eternal. To the latter therefore, we wish to direct their attention. And how is that to be done? Why, not according to these preachers, by laying open their true nature, and representing them in plain language as they really are; but by arraying them in the phantastic dress, and borrowed colouring of those very objects, with which we complain men are too conversant. Instead of developing mysteries, we multiply them. Instead of commending ourselves to every man's conscience by manifestation of the truth, we cast a tawdry veil over it. And instead of turning their eyes away from vanity, we direct them to it. A whole sermon, for example, shall be taken up in describing a palace, a garden, or a city, with an intimation now and then, that heaven is more beautiful and glorious than either of them. Or the whole time shall be employed in relating the incidents of a journey, or a voyage, with a hint here and there that the character and condition of the Christian in his way to heaven are shadowed forth by these emblems. And thus the attention of the people being held, the greater part of the discourse, to objects of sense, they are more amused than instructed,

ed, and diverted than improved. Surely, then, the dealing thus largely in metaphors, tends rather to impoverish than enrich the mind, to sensualize the heart rather than elevate it to heaven. And I ask, Is not this a great evil?---The next evil we mentioned is,

2. The misapplication of figures, whereby false ideas are given the hearer of the things they are made to stand for.

It is easy to conceive how men's notions of the other world, invisible spirits, and the blessed God himself, may in this way be perverted. A licentious imagination has given rise to tenets the most absurd and impious. To this the idolatry of the pagan world may be traced up as its proper source. "Not knowing God, and glorifying him as God, but *becoming vain in their imaginations*, they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and so were given up to vile affections and a reprobate mind*." And if men will take unwarrantable liberties in discoursing of the nature and essence of God, if they will call in metaphors to their aid, in order to explain the manner of the divine subsistence, and will talk of that great Being with the same familiarity they do of their fellow-creatures; are they not chargeable with growing vain in their imaginations, and taking us a step back again towards the absurd notions and idolatrous practices of the pagans? Though they may not violate the second commandment in the grossest sense, by making graven images of the Deity, they are yet guilty of a degree of impiety and profaneness. To the same source, I mean that of a luxuriant fancy, may be referred, the gross notions of the Mahometans respecting a future state.

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* Rom. i. 21, 23, 26, 28:

Their prophet, by the aid of a bold eastern imagination, has accommodated his doctrine to the sensual taste of his votaries, and so done infinite mischief in the world. And do not they act as if they meant to convert men to the religion of the false prophet, who can discourse of nothing in the Christian scheme but under the veil of mystery, though the gospel has taken away that veil, and taught us with open face to behold as in a glass the glory of the Lord? Nor is it to be wondered at, that men conceive erroneously of the operations of the Spirit, communion with God, the temptations of Satan, the joys of heaven, and the pains of hell; if these things are never discoursed of as they really are, but under images alike gross and sensual with those we meet with in the Koran. Once more,

3. The reasoning injudiciously from types and figures, begets a kind of faith that is precarious and ineffectual.

We have clear and positive proofs of the facts the gospel relates, and the important doctrines that are founded thereon. But if, instead of examining these proofs to the bottom, and reasoning with men upon them, we content ourselves with mere analogical evidence, and rest the issue of the question in debate upon fanciful and imaginary grounds, our faith will be continually wavering, and produce no substantial and abiding fruits. An enthusiast, struck with appearances, instantly yields his assent to a proposition, without considering at all the evidence. But as soon as his passions cool, and the false glare upon his imagination subsides, his faith dies away, and the fruit expected from it proves utterly abortive. To treat therefore divine truths after this manner, as if the direct and proper evidence were insufficient, is to do those truths

great injustice, to affront the understanding of our hearers, and to injure them in their most important interests. The apostles, wherever they came, soberly reasoned both with Jews and Gentiles concerning the Messiah and his kingdom; with the former out of the Old Testament Scriptures, which they admitted to be the word of God; and with the latter from those principles of nature which they acknowledged to be divine. And in such manner should we discourse of the great truths of religion, first laying down those which are admitted on all hands, then reasoning from them to others by necessary consequence; and having established the divine authority of the Scriptures, proceed to prove, by clear, direct, and positive evidence, the doctrine therein contained. A faith thus generated in the minds of men will not fail, with the concurring energy of the holy Spirit, to produce the fruits of love and obedience.

Thus have we pointed out some of the evils which unthinking people are in danger of suffering from allegorical preaching. But this is not all. Men of more refined understandings, and a sceptical turn of mind, are induced hereby to reject religion, and treat it with contempt. Suppose a man of this cast to go into a Christian assembly, and hear the plain histories of the Old Testament allegorized: as for instance, the falling of the borrowed axe into Jordan, made to signify the apostasy of our first parents, and Elisha's causing it to swim, interpreted of our miraculous recovery by Christ; suppose him, I say, to hear a whole discourse thus managed, what would be the effect? He would perhaps conclude that this fanciful account of the doctrines meant to be inculcated, was the best proof the preacher could bring in support of them, and so would

be confirmed in his infidelity ; while sensible people, who do believe them, would be hurt to the last degree by the officious zeal of this inconsiderate expounder of Scripture.

So injurious to the cause of truth is this fanciful mode of interpreting Scripture, that a late virulent opposer of Christianity * insidiously adopted it, in order to bring the gospels of the four evangelists into contempt. Under pretence of zeal for his Bible, he tells us with a grave countenance, that the accounts of our Saviour's miracles are to be taken not literally but mystically ; so meaning to deprive us of one main evidence of the truth of Christianity, by bringing the reality of the miracles into question ; and at the same time to raise a laugh upon Christians, as a company of credulous fools, ready to receive any interpretation of Scripture as genuine, which either ignorance or fancy may impose upon it. Sure I am, the real friends of Jesus would not like to rank with men of this cast ; they, however, who treat Scripture in the manner we have been protesting against, must not be angry with us if we tell them, that they are gratifying, though undesignedly, the wishes of these men, and in effect helping forward the cause of infidelity.

A word or two now, shall suffice for the evils attending *declamatory* preaching, by which I mean all discourses, whether allegorical or not, that are destitute of sober reasoning and addressed merely to the passions ; loose essays, or harangues on popular subjects, filled with trite observations, and set off with witty conceits and trifling stories, delivered in a manner more
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* Mr Woolston, in his " Moderator between an Infidel and an Apostate ;" and his " Six Discourses on the Miracles of Christ."

suitable to the stage than the pulpit. We have already observed, that such kind of preaching is by no means adapted to instruct and edify. But what I have here to add is, that its tendency is extremely pernicious. It begets contempt, in those who are ill-affected to religion. It excites levity in those who are indifferent about it. It disgusts sensible and serious Christians. And if any may be supposed to be awakened by it, such persons are in danger of mistaking impressions, that are the effect of a mere mechanical influence upon their passions, for the work of God upon their hearts. And should not these evils be seriously considered, by all who have unhappily fallen into this extravagant manner of preaching? These are not trifling matters. The glory of God, the honour of religion, the welfare of immortal souls, and your own reputation, Sirs, both as men and as ministers, are concerned. But alas! little is to be expected from these expostulations with weak and conceited people, and less with those who are governed in the exercise of their ministry, by base and unworthy motives. It is, however, to be hoped, that good men who may have been hastily precipitated by a lively imagination and a warm heart, into this mode of treating divine things, will on sober reflection, acknowledge that they may possibly be in an error, and that it is their duty to speak the word, as with all plainness, so with sobriety, wisdom, and reverence.

Upon the whole, let us, my brethren, be persuaded to consider well, the infinite importance of the message with which we are entrusted to mankind, and how much the credit of religion and our real usefulness depend upon our delivering it in a proper manner. Let us form our preaching, not to the depraved taste of any set of people whatever, but after the model our
divine

divine Master and his apostles have set us. Let us first, endeavour to inform mens understandings, and then to get at their consciences; always remembering, that if these objects are not gained, the more we practise upon their passions, the greater real injury we do them. Let us, in the progress of our ministry, look well to our aims and views; ever making it our grand end to glorify God, and save the souls of men. And while in matters of indifference, we become all things to all men, let us not forget what our Bible tells us, that *if we seek to please men, we are not the servants of Christ* *. And thus pursuing the line of duty which God has laid down in his word, and depending on the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit for success, let us assure ourselves, our labour shall not be in vain in the Lord.

PART II.

WE have considered the history of the parable before us, enquired into the grounds and reasons of this mode of instruction, mentioned the peculiar inducements our Saviour had to address the people in this manner, and laid down some rules to assist us in the interpretation of the parables. This has led me to observe the importance, of carefully guarding against an intemperate use of metaphors, in discourses on moral and religious subjects; an evil which too much prevails in our time. This sort of preaching, and all preaching of a mere declamatory kind, whether allegorical or not, we have described; and shewn the false principles upon which it is adopted, and the very pernicious tendency of it. And we now return to the subject before us—the ex-

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planation

* Gal. i. 10.

planation and improvement of "The parable of the sower." The general outlines of instruction meant to be conveyed by it, appear upon the face of the parable: we are happy, however, in having our Saviour's own interpretation of it, as we are hereby secured from the danger of mingling our own vain conceits with it. His exposition of it the evangelist has given us*, which we shall now recite in his own words.

"Hear ye the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart: this is he which received seed by the way-side. But he that received the seed into stony-places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it: yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth, because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns, is he that heareth the word, and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground, is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it, which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty."

His audience, you see, our Saviour ranks under four distinct characters—the INATTENTIVE—the ENTHUSIASTIC—the WORLDLY-MINDED—and the SINCERE; each of which characters he draws with admirable precision and energy. And since most assemblies consist of persons who answer to these descriptions, we propose to consider particularly what our Lord has here said respecting each of them. But in order to open the way

* Ver. 18,--23.

way to this our grand object, it will be necessary to explain the principal leading ideas in the parable. These are—*the Sower*—*the Seed*—*the Ground*—and *the Effect of casting the seed into it.*

I. By *the Sower* is meant our Saviour himself, and all those whose office it is to instruct men in the truths and duties of religion.

The business of the husbandman is, of all others, most important and necessary, requires much skill and attention, is painful and laborious, and yet not without pleasure and profit. A man of this profession ought to be well versed in agriculture, to understand the difference of soils, the various methods of cultivating the ground, the seed proper to be sown, the seasons for every kind of work, and in short how to avail himself of all circumstances that arise for the improvement of his farm. He should be patient of fatigue, inured to disappointment, and unwearied in his exertions. Every day will have its proper business. Now he will manure his ground, then plough it; now cast the seed into it, then harrow it; incessantly watch and weed it; and after many anxious cares, and, if a man of piety, many prayers to Heaven, he will earnestly expect the approaching harvest. The time come, with a joyful eye he will behold the ears fully ripe bending to the hands of the reapers, put in the sickle, collect the sheaves, and bring home the precious grain to his garner.

Hence we may frame an idea of the character and duty of a Christian minister. He ought to be well-skilled in divine knowledge, to have a competent acquaintance with the world and the human heart, to perceive clearly wherein the true interest of mankind consists, to have just apprehensions of the way of salvation,

vation, and to be rightly instructed in the various duties he has to inculcate. He should have an aptitude and ability to teach, and his bosom should burn with a flaming zeal for the glory of God, the honour of Christ, and the welfare of immortal souls. He should, in fine, be endued with a humble, meek, patient, and persevering spirit.

Thus qualified for his work, he must “study to approve himself unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth *.” He must consider well the character and condition of those he instructs, adapt himself to their various capacities, seize every favourable opportunity of getting at their hearts, and call in to his aid every possible argument to enforce divine truth. He must give to every one his portion in due season, milk to babes, and meat to strong men; and lead them on from one stage of instruction to another, as they can bear it, initiating them in the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, and so bringing them forward to perfection. Now it must be his object, by sounding the terrors of the divine law in their ears, to plough up the fallow-ground of men’s hearts; and then, by proclaiming the glad tidings of the gospel, to cast in the seeds of every Christian grace and virtue. He must be “instant in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all long-suffering †;” put out his whole strength, be superior to every discouragement, and labour incessantly in his duty.

Pain and pleasure will attend all his exertions, and alternately affect his spirits. The different characters he has to deal with, and different impressions the word makes at different times; the various circumstances

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* 2 Tim. ii. 15.

† Chap. iv. 2.

that arise to aid or obstruct his endeavours, and the various frames to which he is himself liable; these will all operate to create sometimes anxious fears, and at others, the most pleasing expectations. Now we shall hear him with great sadness of heart complaining, "Who hath believed my report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed *?" and then, in the animated language of the apostle, "thanking God for that he hath caused him to triumph in Christ, and made manifest *by his labours* the favour of his knowledge in every place †." Now we see him "go forth weeping, bearing precious seed:" and then "come again rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him ‡."—Such are the duties and labours, such the anxieties and hopes, such the disappointments and successes, of those who preach the gospel, and who answer to the character of *the sower* in our parable, who went forth to sow.

Of these sowers some have been more skilful, laborious, and successful than others. Among them the apostle Paul holds a distinguished rank. By his lips the gospel was published through a great part of the known world, and by his hands churches were planted in most of the cities and provinces of the Roman empire. And, thanks be to God! persons of this character have been raised up in every age, by whose means divine knowledge, with all the blessed fruits of it, has been propagated among mankind. But the most skilful and painful of all sowers was our Lord Jesus Christ. He, the Prince of prophets, the most illustrious of all teachers, spake the word with a clearness, affection, and authority, that surpassed all who
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* Isa. liii. 1.

† 2 Cor. ii. 14.

‡ Psa. cxxvi. 6.

went before him, or have ever followed him. This leads us,

II. To consider *the Seed* sown, which our Saviour explains of “the word of the kingdom,” or, as Luke has it *, “the word of God.”

The husbandman will be careful to sow his ground with good seed. He goeth forth, says the Psalmist, bearing *precious seed*—seed of such a nature as will produce, with the favour of Divine Providence, wholesome fruit—fruit that will nourish and strengthen those who partake of it. In like manner, the word of the kingdom is precious seed—seed which will not fail, when sown in the heart, and cherished there by a divine influence, to produce wholesome and pleasant fruit.

By “the word of the kingdom” is meant the gospel, or the glad tidings of salvation by Christ. Our Saviour came to erect “a kingdom,” infinitely more happy, glorious, and durable, than any that had ever flourished in our world. And whether we consider it in reference to *personal religion—the church—or a future state*, it exhibits to our view a most striking display of the majesty and benignity of God.—Let us apply it,

1. To *personal religion*.

In this sense it is used by our Saviour, when he exhorts his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness †:” and it is this the apostle means when, adopting the same figure, he tells us, “it is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost ‡.” In the heart of every real Christian a kingdom is established. This kingdom succeeds to one that had been torn to pieces by intestine

* Chap. viii. 11.

† Mat. vi. 33.

‡ Rom. xiv. 17.

intestine broils and animosities: for such is the state of the mind while enslaved by sin and sense. But now Christ is the sovereign of it: he sways his sceptre over all the powers of the soul. Enlightened by his doctrine, and subdued by his grace, they all submit to his mild and equitable government. Peace, order, and good faith are restored to this little common-wealth. It confides in him the Prince of peace, as its Redeemer and Saviour, enjoys its liberties under his influence and protection, and cordially acquiesces in his authority and laws. What a blessed revolution is this in the breast of every convert to religion! How many and great are the immunities to which such an one is entitled! A kingdom thus rising into existence shall become more and more happy and glorious. And however it may sometimes be shook by the powers of darkness, it shall prevail against all opposition, and by and by attain to the greatest height of splendour and glory in the world above.

Now the seed sown in the hearts of men is *the word* of this kingdom, or that divine instruction which relates to the foundation, erection, principles, maxims, laws, immunities, government, present happiness, and future glory of this kingdom: all which we have contained in our Bibles. It is the doctrine of Christ—a doctrine which comprehends in it the whole system of divine truth, whereby we are taught our guilt, depravity and misery, the grounds on which we are pardoned, justified and saved, the nature and necessity of faith and repentance, the honours and privileges to which we are entitled as Christians, our duty to God, ourselves, and one another, the aids and influences of the Holy Spirit, and the glorious prospects of a future

ture happy immortality.—Again, let us apply the idea of a *kingdom*,

2. To the *Christian dispensation*, or the whole visible church.

In this sense it is used by John the Baptist, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven,” that is, the gospel dispensation, “is at hand*.” All who profess the doctrine, and submit to the institutions of Christ, compose one body of which he is the head, one kingdom of which he is the sovereign—“a kingdom which,” he himself tells us, “is not of this world †,” established not upon the same principles, nor governed and defended after the same manner, as the kingdoms of this world. It is a spiritual kingdom, erected upon the ruins of the fall, and gradually rising to a kind of glory, far surpassing that of the greatest empire on earth. Christ, though invisible to the human eye, reigns over it with uncontrolled authority, unerring wisdom, and infinite gentleness and love. And his subjects, who render cheerful allegiance to him, he not only protects and saves, but enriches with the best and noblest blessings.—And by *the word* of the kingdom, in this idea of it, is intended all the laws which Christ has instituted for the government of his church; and all the instructions he has given us respecting its worship, ordinances, discipline, protection, sufferings, increase, and final glory.—Once more, the term *kingdom* is to be understood also,

3. Of *heaven*, and all the happiness and glory to be enjoyed there.

So it is used by our Saviour, in his sermon on the mount, where he assures those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven:”

* Mat. iii. 2.

† John xviii. 36.

heaven * :” and in another place, “ Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom †.” The splendour of this kingdom exceeds all description and imagination. “ Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him ‡.” In heaven the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords, means ere long to collect together all his faithful subjects, from the most remote parts of his empire ; to make one grand exhibition to their astonished sight, of the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the honour of his excellent majesty ; to unveil his infinite excellencies to their view, after a manner the present state will not admit of ; and to entertain them with joys the most refined, satisfying, and eternal.—Well, and the gospel is *the word* of this kingdom, as it has assured us upon the most certain grounds of its reality, and given us the amplest description of its glories, our present imperfect faculties are capable of receiving. “ Life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel ||.” And “ God, of his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away §.”—Thus we have the sum of that doctrine, which the ministers of Christ are instructed to publish to the world, and which is *the seed* the sower went forth to sow.—Hence we proceed,

III. To consider *the ground* into which the seed is cast, by which our Saviour intends *the soul* of man,

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that

* Matt. v. 10.

† Luke xii. 32.

‡ 1 Cor. ii. 9.

|| 2 Tim. i. 10.

§ 1 Pet. i. 3, 4.

that is, the understanding, judgment, memory, will, and affections.

The ground, I mean the earth on which we tread, is now in a different state from what it was in the beginning, the curse of God having been denounced upon it *. In like manner, the soul of man, in consequence of the apostasy of our first parents, is enervated, polluted, and depraved. This is true of every individual of the human race. It is a fact sufficiently attested by experience, and plainly asserted in Scripture. "God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions †." "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin: and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned ‡." "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one ||." "There is none righteous, no not one: they are all gone out of the way §." "The Scripture hath concluded all under sin ¶." Of the nature, extent, and dreadful effects of this miserable depravity, we shall have frequent occasion to speak hereafter. It shall suffice at present to observe, that as there is a variety in the soil of different countries, and as the ground in some places is less favourable for cultivation than in others, so it is in regard of the soul. There is a difference in the strength, vigour, and extent of men's natural faculties; nor can it be denied, that the moral powers of the soul are corrupted in some, through sinful indulgences, to a greater degree than in others.

As to mental abilities, who is not struck with the prodigious disparity observable among mankind in this respect? Here we see one of a clear understanding, a lively imagination, a sound judgment, a retentive memory;

* Gen. iii. 17. † Eccl. vii. 29. ‡ Rom. v. 12.

|| Job xiv. 4. § Rom. iii. 10. 12. ¶ Gal. iii. 22.

mory ; and there another, remarkably deficient in each of these excellences, if not wholly destitute of them all. These are gifts distributed among mankind in various portions. But none possess them in that perfection they were enjoyed by our first ancestors in their primeval state. On the contrary, they are reduced, even in the most shining characters, to a very humiliating degree beneath the original standard. So that it is true of all mankind, that they are at best weak and fallible, especially in regard of the great concerns of religion.

But it is with the moral powers of the soul, we are here chiefly concerned. There is in every man, previous to his being renewed by the grace of God, a prevailing aversion to what is holy and good, and a strong propensity to what is sinful and pernicious. "The carnal mind," as the apostle tells us*, "is enmity against God ; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." But then this depravity, which is universal, is capable of being heightened and increased. This is too often the case. Repeated acts of sin confirm vicious habits, and render them unconquerable ; and men, having a long while boldly resisted the dictates of natural conscience, and the persuasions of religion, are at length given up to blindness of eyes and hardness of heart. In such cases, they answer to that striking description of the apostle †, where he speaks of them as "ground which, bearing thorns and briars, is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned." But there are some who, though partakers with others of the general depravity, are yet of a nature more tender and flexible ; and, though they have the seeds of all sin in their hearts,

yet

* Rom. viii. 7.

† Heb. vi. 8.

yet their growth having been checked by early instructions, and the restraints of divine grace, the soil may be said to be more favourable for cultivation than that just described.

This view of the matter receives confirmation from the different account our Saviour gives of the several kinds of ground in which the good seed was sown. That which was stony, by reason of the thin mould cast over it, was more favourable for the reception of the seed, than the beaten path by the way-side; and that in the hedges than the stony places. Yet neither of these soils, though somewhat different from each other, could bring forth fruit to perfection without cultivation. Nor do we mean to say, whatever difference there may be in the natural tempers of persons, or however they may be assisted and improved by education, and the ordinary restraints of Providence, that they will any of them bring forth good fruit, without the effectual influence of renewing grace. The ground must be first made good, and then it will be fruitful. So our Saviour says *, “Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by his fruit.” But of this we shall have occasion to speak more particularly hereafter.—It remains that we now,

IV. Consider the general *Process* of this business, as it is either expressly described or plainly intimated in the parable.

The ground, first manured and made good, is laid open by the plough, the seed is cast into it, the earth is thrown over it, in the bosom of the earth it remains a while, at length, mingling with it, it gradually expands, shoots up through the clods, rises into the stalk
and

* Mat. xii. 33.

and then the ear, so ripens, and at the appointed time brings forth fruit. Such is the wonderful process of vegetation. Nor can we advert thus generally to these particulars, without taking into view at once the exertions of the husbandman, the mutual operation of the seed and the earth on each other, and the seasonable influence of the sun and the rain, under the direction and benediction of divine providence.

So, in regard of the great business of religion, the hearts of men are first disposed to listen to the instructions of God's word; these instructions are then, like the seed, received into the understanding, will, and affections; and after a while, having had their due operation there, bring forth, in various degrees, the acceptable fruits of love and obedience. And how natural, in this case, as in the former, while we are considering the rise and progress of religion in the soul, to advert, agreeable to the figure in the parable, to the happy concurrence of a divine influence, with the great truths of the gospel, dispensed by ministers, and with the reasonings of the mind and heart about them. To shut out all idea here, of such influence, would be as absurd, as to exclude the influence of the atmosphere and sun, from any concern in culture and vegetation. Let the husbandman lay what manure he will on barren ground, it can produce no change in the temperature of it, unless it thoroughly penetrates it, and kindly mingles with it; and this it cannot do, without the assistance of the falling dew and rain, and the genial heat of the sun. In like manner, all attempts, however proper in themselves, to change the hearts of men, and to dispose them to a cordial reception of divine truths, will be vain without the concurrence of almighty grace. Of Lydia it is said, "the Lord open-

ed her heart, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul *." And "it is God," the apostle tells us, "that worketh in us, both to will and to do of his good pleasure †." Nor can the seed, though cast into the most favourable soil, expand, shoot up, and ripen into fruit, without a concurrence of the same influence, which rendered cultivation in the first instance effectual. Suppose the sun no more to rise, and the dews no more to fall; there would be a total end to vegetation, the seed would perish in the clods, and the earth cease to bring forth her fruits. And so it would be in the religious world, were the influences of divine grace totally suspended.

And now, upon this view of the matter, how great the absurdity, as well as impiety, of excluding the operations of the holy Spirit, from all concern in the renovation of the heart! If we may reason by analogy, from the works of nature, to those of grace, this reflection must strike us in the most forcible manner. It is true, our Saviour does not, in his explanation of the parable, say any thing expressly of the influences of the Spirit. But the doctrine itself, which he elsewhere asserts in the clearest terms, is founded in the principle of the parable; and so interwoven with its very frame and contexture, that to deny the former, is in effect to destroy the latter. What man, in his senses, can suppose, that in the account our Lord here gives of sowing, he meant to affirm, that the sun and the weather have no concern in the success of this business? How absurd then to imagine, that in a discourse, wherein he represents by this figure of husbandry, the effect of his gospel on the minds of his hearers, he had no regard at all to the exertion of a divine influence,

in

* Acts xvi. 14.

† Philip. ii. 13.

in order to render it effectual ! Could he, who every where taught, that all nature was full of God, and that there is not a spire of grafs that does not owe its vegetation to an almighty energy : could he, I say, be indifferent to fo sublime and reasonable a doctrine, as that of the fovereign controul, and influence of the Deity on the hearts of men ?

To object the difficulty of conceiving how this influence is exerted to the existence of the fact itself, is to plunge ourfelves into a greater and ftill more inextricable difficulty ; I mean that of fhutting out God both from the natural and moral world, and placing blind chance, and the will of a mere creature, on the throne of fupreme Omnipotence. But the fcriptures every where affert, in plain words, what our Saviour in this parable takes for granted. He himfelf tells us, that, “ except a man is born of the fpirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven ;” and, at the fame time, replies to Nicodemus’s objection, “ How can thefe things be ?” by faying, “ the wind bloweth where it lifteth, and no man knows whence it comes and whither it goes, fo is every one that is born of the fpirit *.” The evangelift John affirms, that “ they who become the fons of God, and believe on the name of Chrift, are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flefh, nor of the will of man, but of God †.” The apoftle Paul declares, “ we are God’s workmanfhip created in Chrift Jefus unto good works ‡ ;” and that “ he hath faved us by the wafhing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghoft ; which he fhed on us abundantly, through Jefus Chrift our Saviour ||.” And the apoftle James affures us, that “ God of his own will

* John iii 5, 8.

† John i. 12, 13.

‡ Eph. ii. 10.

|| Tit. iii. 5, 6.

will, begat us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures *." But these are only a few among many other passages of the same import.

Thus have we considered the leading ideas in the parable of the sower—*the Seed—the Ground*—and the gradual *Process* of this business, from the first cultivation of the soil, and the casting the seed into it, to the happy issue of the whole, in the production of fruit at harvest. And these ideas we have applied to the origin, progress, and effect of religion in the heart and life of a real Christian. So our way is open to the consideration of the several characters our Saviour means to hold up to our view, which will be the subject of the following discourses. In the mean time let us make a few reflections on what has been said.

1. How honourable, important, and laborious is the employment of ministers !

Our business, my brethren, is with the immortal souls of men, to plough up the fallow ground of the heart, to cast in the seed of truth, and all with a view to their bringing forth the fruits of holiness. Can any service be more interesting, or more painful and pleasant than this ? What fervent zeal, what tender pity, what persevering resolution should inspire our breasts ! Let us get all the knowledge we can in our profession, let us be expert in all the duties of it, let us have our hearts in it, and put out all our strength in the labours of it. Let us be instant in season and out of season, watch for the souls of men, as those that must give an account, and seize every favourable opportunity that offers of promoting the great objects of God's glory and their salvation. We must expect, like the husbandman,

* James i. 18.

bardman, to meet with our disappointments, and many will be our anxieties and sorrows. But let us not be unduly cast down: though we sow in tears, we shall ere long reap in joy.

2. What a great blessing is the word of God!

It is more precious far than the seed with which the husbandman sows his ground. With this we are begotten by the will of God, that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. Divine knowledge, entering into our understandings, and mingling with our experience, makes us wise unto salvation, cheers and enlivens our hearts, and disposes us to every good word and work. O how attentively therefore should we read the word of God! how diligently should we endeavour to understand it! how implicitly submit our judgment and conscience to its authority! how cordially embrace its sacred truths! and how regularly and constantly govern our lives by its precepts! "To" this good "word of God, brethren, we commend you," persuaded that "it is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them that are sanctified *."

3. What cause have we for deep humiliation before God, when we reflect on the miserable depravity of human nature!

The earth has evident signs of the curse of God upon it. "Thorns and thistles it brings forth, and in sorrow, and in the sweat of our face we eat of it, till we return unto the ground †." In like manner, the soul of man is wretchedly dishonoured, enervated, and corrupted by sin. The soil that was originally rich, pure, and flourishing, and brought forth fruit spontaneously, has lost its beauty and verdure, is be-
come

* Acts xx. 32.

† Gen. iii. 17, 18, 19.

come cold and barren, and till it is manured and cultivated by divine grace, produces little else but bitter herbs and noxious plants. What have we then, in this our apostate state, to boast of? "God created man in uprightness, but he hath sought out many inventions *." The gold is become dim, the fine gold is changed. Let us therefore humbly prostrate ourselves before God, and in the language of the patriarch Job say, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee, wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes †."—In a word,

4. And lastly, How great are our obligations to divine grace for the renewing influences of the Holy Spirit!

If the barren soil of our hearts has been cultivated, if the seed of divine truth has been cast into it, if the dews from the everlasting hills have copiously descended on it, if the balmy influence of the blessed Spirit has warmed it, caused the living principles of grace implanted there to dilate, spring up, and bring forth the fruits of holiness; if, I say, God of his mercy has taken such measures as these with us, how devoutly should we acknowledge his goodness! Let not the regard which the sower pays to divine providence, reproach our inattention and insensibility to the more noble and salutary influences of divine grace. These let us earnestly implore, and in these let us humbly confide. And ere long our shouts of praise to the great Author of all grace, shall far exceed those of the grateful husbandman to the God of nature, when he brings home the precious grain to his garner.

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* Eccles. vii. 29.

† Job xlii. 5, 6.

DISCOURSE II.

THE CHARACTER OF INATTENTIVE HEARERS CONSIDERED.

MAT. xiii. 4.

And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way-side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured them up.

WE have explained at large the leading ideas in this parable, and proceed now to consider the several kinds of *Hearers* our Lord meant to describe. Their characters are drawn with admirable precision, and will furnish us with many useful lessons of instruction. They may be all classed under four heads—the INATTENTIVE—the ENTHUSIASTIC—the WORLDLY-MINDED—the SINCERE. It is upon the first of these we are now to discourse.

FIRST, The INATTENTIVE, or those upon whose minds the word has no salutary effect at all.

When the sower casts abroad his seed, some fall on the path, lying through the field, or on that without the inclosure, the way-side, or caufey: and so the ground being common, uncultivated, and grown hard,
by

by being frequently trod on, it is incapable of receiving the seed into it. Here therefore it lies, and is either bruised and destroyed by the feet of him who next passes that way; or else the fowls of the air, birds of prey, quickly come and devour it. How natural the description!

Let us now hear our Saviour's exposition of this part of the parable. "When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart: This is he who received seed by the way-side."—Here several things are to be observed; as,

1. These persons *hear* the word. They are not deaf, and so utterly incapable of hearing. Nor are they determined at all events, that they will not hear. This is the deplorable character of too many people. They fly from the word of God and the means of religion, as they would from the pestilence. They refuse him that speaketh, that is, will not so much as give him a hearing. No consideration can prevail on them to enter the places where the gospel is preached. And when God, in his providence, calls aloud to them, they reply, as did the Jews of whom the prophet Jeremiah speaks, "I will not hear, and this is their manner from their youth *." But the persons here meant to be described do hear. So far their conduct is commendable—But then,

2. They are only *occasional* hearers of the word. They are, in regard of the assemblies where the gospel is preached, what the way-side is to the field, where the seed is sown, ground without the inclosure, or whereon the seed falls as it were accidentally or by chance.

* Jer. xxii. 21.

chance. They come now and then to the house of God, induced by motives of curiosity and amusement, or others more base and unworthy. But admitting that, in compliance with custom, education, or at best the constraints of conscience, they attend more regularly; yet,

3. They are *not at all prepared* for hearing the word. The ground is beaten ground, it has received no cultivation whatever. "Keep thy foot," says the wise man, "when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools *." We ought to consider before hand, what we are about, to look well to our views and motives, and to endeavour to compose our minds to the solemnities of divine service. But to these exercises of the heart, the persons we are here speaking of, are perfect strangers. They rush into the presence of Almighty God, as the horse into the battle, without any awe of that great Being upon their spirits, and without any concern to profit by what they hear. And hence it may be presumed,

4. That they hear *in a heedless desultory manner*. Their attention is not fixed, their thoughts are not collected, they regard not the drift of the discourse, observe not the connection, nor comprehend the reasoning. And so,

5. They *understand it not*, that is, they remain grossly ignorant. Not that they are destitute of the powers of perception and reasoning, in a state of absolute idiocy or insanity. No: They have common sense, and it may be, a great deal of natural sprightliness and sagacity. But not using the faculties they are endowed with, not listening to what they hear, and not taking

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* Eccles. v. 1.

pains to apprehend and retain it ; they only affix some general idea to this or that passing sentence : and so, are as uninformed, as if they did not hear at all.— But there are some, in the class of hearers our Lord here describes, who,

6. Do *in a sense* understand the word : for the seed is said, in the latter part of the verse, to be sown *in their hearts*. Now, these persons hear with more attention, but alas ! to no better purpose than the others : for their attention being the fruit of mere curiosity, all the knowledge they acquire in religion, is merely speculative. And of this they have, perhaps, not a little, inasmuch, that they think themselves qualified to be teachers of others. But with all their systematical acquaintance with doctrines, all their knowledge of technical terms, all their nice distinctions, and all their profound metaphysical reasonings ; they are miserably ignorant of what lies at the foundation of religion. They know not their own hearts, they perceive not the evil of sin, they apprehend not the danger to which they are exposed, they have no just idea of their need of Christ and his salvation, and of the beauty and excellence of true holiness. They hold the truth in unrighteousness, a great deal of error is mixed with it, or if their notions are just, yet there is one grand truth, of which they have no conception at all, and that is, the infinite importance of these things. And so these persons may be said, *not to understand* the word of the kingdom.—But if they do, in a sense, understand it, yet,

7. It *makes not any abiding impression* on the heart. The seed, as Luke expresses it, was *trodde[n] down*, and that instantly, by the next passenger. So divine instructions are treated by these persons with contempt,

or at best with indifference. They are not laid up in the memory, and seriously considered and reflected upon, but are quickly forgotten and lost. These hearers of the word, “are like unto a man that beholdeth his natural face in a glass, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was *.”—And this leads us to what is principally observable in the text, and that is,

8. And lastly, our Saviour’s account of *the manner in which these impressions are effaced*, and all their salutary effect defeated. “The fowls of the air came and devoured the seed,” which had thus fallen on the way-side or beaten path: which our Lord explains of “the wicked one’s coming and catching away that which was sown in the hearts” of them that heard, lest, as Luke adds, “they should believe and be saved.”—Here three things are to be considered,

I. Who this *wicked one* is, and why he is so called :

II. What is meant by his *catching away the seed*, and how this is done : and,

III. What is the malevolent end proposed—*that they might not believe and be saved.*

I. Who is this *wicked one*, and why is he so called ?

The wicked one is *satan*, as Mark expresses it †; and *the devil*, as Luke has it ‡. To deny that such a spirit *can* exist, merely because our eyes do not behold him, is most unreasonable, and in effect to deny the Being of God himself. And to deny that he actually *does* exist, is to deny the truth of the scriptures. But I am not here debating with either atheists or deists. It is admitted that there is such an one as *satan* or the devil.

Now, for our account of him, we must be indebted to

* James i. 23, 24.

† Chap. iv. 15.

‡ Chap. viii. 12.

to the Bible. And what does that tell us concerning him? It tells us, that he is the chief and leader of that numerous host of angels, which waged war against Heaven, and for their rebellion were driven thence into the mansions of the damned, where they "are reserved in everlasting chains under darkness, unto the judgment of the great day*." He is endowed with powers, which far transcend those of mankind; and these, stimulated by unsufferable pride and desperate malevolence, are exerted with all possible energy, to oppose the counsels of God and the interests of men. Hence he is called *satan*, that is, the adversary; and the *devil*, that is, the accuser. It was he that seduced our first parents from their allegiance to Heaven, and so introduced sin and death into our world: where, having thus set up his standard, he still exercises his usurped authority. He is "the prince of this world †," "the prince of the power of the air ‡" It was he that solicited the destruction of the patriarch Job ||. It was he that "stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number the people §." It was he who, by becoming "a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets," persuaded Ahab to fight with the Syrian king to his ruin ¶. It was he that "stood at the right hand of Joshua, the high priest, to resist him**." It was he, in fine, that tempted our Saviour in the wilderness, most virulently opposed his ministry, and was the chief actor in the last sad catastrophe of his sufferings and death.

Wicked men, styled in Scripture, the children of the devil, are *his ministers*; sometimes openly executing

* Jude i. 6.

† John xiv. 30.

‡ Eph. ii. 2.

|| Chap. i. 6---ult. chap. ii. 1---7.

§ 1 Chron. xxi. 1.

¶ 2 Chron. xviii. 20, 21.

** Zech. iii. 1, 2.

ting his commands, and at others, like their master, who “ transforms himself into an angel of light,” assuming the character of “ ministers of righteousness *.” So, “ with all power, and signs, and lying wonders, he propagates through our world error, vice, and discord, with a long train of the most tremendous evils †. And so, this once peaceful and pleasant spot is become an aceldama, a field of blood. Horrid monster ! to thy influence all the calamities our eyes behold and our hearts lament, are to be traced back ; and upon thy devoted head it is fit the wrath of incensed justice, and the curse of injured innocence, should fall.¹

Further, he not only carries on his designs by instruments employed to that end, but has himself access to the hearts of men ; and though he cannot force them to act against their will, yet he knows how by a thousand arts to catch their attention, play upon their imagination, inflame their desires, and rouse their passions. He, “ the god of this world, blinds the minds of them who believe not † ;” “ works in the children of disobedience || ;” “ puts it into the heart of Judas to betray” his Master § ; “ fills the heart of Ananias to lie to the Holy Ghost ¶ ;” lays “ snares” for some ; in order “ to lead” them “ captive **,” and “ walks about, like a roaring lion, to devour” others †† ; “ beguiles” the former “ through his subtilty,” using a variety of “ wiles” and “ devices,” in order “ to get advantage against them †† ;” and violently assaults the latter, now by “ his messengers buffeting” them, and then discharging “ his fiery darts” at them |||.

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In

* 2 Cor. xi. 14, 15.

† 2 Theff. ii. 8, 9.

‡ 2 Cor. iv. 4.

|| Eph. ii. 2.

§ John xiii. 2.

¶ Acts v. 3.

** 2 Tim. ii. 26.

†† 1 Pet. v. 8.

‡‡ 2 Cor. xi. 13, 14.

Eph. vi. 11. 2 Cor. ii. 11.

||| 2 Cor. xii. 7. Eph. vi. 16.

In fine, he, “ the old serpent, called the devil and satan, deceiveth the whole world * ; and having so done, “ accuseth” them “ before God day and night †.”

From this short scriptural account of satan, it appears with what propriety he is here, and in many other passages, styled emphatically “ the wicked one.” He is wicked himself in the highest degree, for as he exceeds all others in subtilty and power, so also in impiety and sin : a spirit the most proud, false, envious, turbulent, and malignant among all the various orders of fallen spirits. He too is the author of all wickedness, the contriver and promoter of every species of iniquity. Whence, the infinitely numerous evils that prevail in our world are called “ the works of the devil ‡.” Such is the character of this first apostate archangel, the grand, avowed enemy of God and man.—And thus are we led to our second enquiry,

II. What is meant by his “ catching away the seed,” and how is this done ?

“ Immediately,” as Mark has it ||, upon the seeds falling on the ground, “ the fowls of the air came and devoured them up.” So, as our Saviour interprets this circumstance, “ the wicked one cometh, and catcheth away the word of the kingdom that had been sown,” or had loosely fallen *on the hearts* of those just now described.

“ When the sons of God,” as we read in the story of Job, “ came to present themselves before the Lord, satan came also among them to present himself before the Lord §.” In like manner, wherever the gospel is

* Rev. xii. 9.

† Rev. xii. 10.

‡ 1 John iii. 8.

|| Chap. iv. 15.

§ Job i. 6. ii. 1.

is preached, he watches his opportunity to prevent the due effect of the word upon those who hear it. To give a physical account of the manner in which he exerts his influence to that end, is not my business. It is enough to observe, that if we have modes of communicating our ideas to one another, and of exercising the powers of persuasion over the minds and passions of men, there is no absurdity in supposing that satan, though not cloathed in a human body, or visible to a natural eye, may have access to the heart. And the language of our Saviour is so directly and strongly to the point, that it is scarce possible to give it a meaning that can any way justify a denial of the fact. If it were downright enthusiasm to suppose that satan can have any intercourse with the human mind, how is it imaginable that our Lord, who was a clear decisive reasoner upon every subject, would expressly tell us, in the explanation of a parable, and without the least caution to beware of misinterpreting him, that "the wicked one cometh, and catcheth away the word from the heart?" He spoke to plain people, and did not mean to ensnare them with enigmatic or figurative language. Besides, the opinion that then prevailed of the influence of satan in our world was so general, that if there had been no ground for the fact, such language as this in our text, and in those other passages just cited, where satan is said "to have put it into the heart of Judas to betray his master; to have filled the heart of Ananias to lie to the Holy Ghost," and "to work in the children of disobedience;" such language, I say, could not in that case be excused of the charge of dissimulation and a disposition to temporize.

No doubt the doctrine I am defending has been
abused

abused by enthusiasts, on the one hand, and impostors, on the other. But if men would attend to the calm dictates of reason and Scripture, they would be in no danger from either of these quarters. For no more is meant by the influence which satan is supposed in certain cases to exert over the mind, than what is similar to the influence which wicked men are acknowledged to have over others; to allure them by persuasions to sin, and to dissuade them by menaces from their duty. It cannot force them into sin, against the consent of their will; or, in other words, so operate on their minds as to deprive them of that freedom, which is necessary to constitute them accountable creatures. And in no case is it exerted but by the permission, and under the controul, of an infinitely superior being.—To return.

This mighty adversary watches his opportunity to prevent the salutary effect of the word upon those that hear it. And considering what is the character of the sort of hearers we are here speaking of, it is not to be wondered at that he is permitted to catch away the seed sown in their hearts, or that he succeeds in the attempt. For if their motives in attending upon divine service are base and unworthy, if they address themselves to the duties of religion without any previous preparation, if they hear in a careless desultory manner, and if prejudices against the truth are cherished rather than opposed, all which, as we have seen, is the case; how righteous is it in God to permit satan to use every possible artifice to defeat the great and good ends to which religious instructions are directed! Here then let us consider what these artifices are, at the same time remembering that they take effect, and can only do so, by falling in with the false reasonings,

reasonings, and perverse dispositions of those on whom they are practised. How does Satan “catch away the good seed from the heart?” That is our enquiry. I answer—by *diverting men’s attention from the word* while they are hearing it, or while they seem to hear it—by *exciting prejudices against it*—and by *preventing their recollecting it afterwards*.

1. Satan uses his utmost endeavours *to divert men’s attention from the word* while they are hearing it.

The utility and indeed necessity of attention, in order to our reaping advantage from the word, is evident at first view. How is it possible that I should understand what another says, and so be benefited by it, if I do not listen to him? Nor will my hearing a word now and then, or catching a sentence as it passes, do me any material good. We must apply with seriousness, affection, and earnestness, if we will comprehend the reasoning of the speaker, and feel the force of his persuasions. *Hoc age*, said the Roman cryer to the people when the priest led them on to sacrifice. So we must be all attention, or the service will be unacceptable to God, and unprofitable to ourselves.

Now a great variety of circumstances may and often do concur, to divert the mind from what ought to be its only object on these occasions. And where there is no resolution nor even wish to resist these temptations, it is easy to see how they will operate to prevent all salutary effect from the word. The man I here mean to describe, not caring at all whether he is profited by what is said, will not fail to be haunted with a thousand vain and perhaps criminal thoughts and passions. Now, the person, voice, attitude, and manner of the preacher, shall wholly occupy his attention; and if there be any thing singular in either of them,

them, excite disgust or pleasantry. And then his eye shall be caught by the audience, the place where they are assembled, and particularly the countenance, dress, and demeanour, of this or that person who sits near him. And so an infinite multitude of idle ridiculous ideas shall crowd in upon his mind, and like so many demons take possession of his depraved imagination. Or if his attention is not arrested by surrounding objects, the businesses and amusements of life, with all their perplexing anxieties and fascinating desires, shall captivate his thoughts and create a long train of reveries, from which, even if he were disposed, he would find it difficult to extricate himself. And thus, while "the wisdom of divine truth is before him that hath understanding, the fool's eyes are in the ends of the earth *." There are few assemblies which do not furnish some striking examples of such criminal inattention, here one quietly composing himself to sleep, and there another indecently gazing on all around him. And I fear the hearts of the generality of hearers, could we enter into them, would exhibit the sad scene we have been describing in its full force; a torrent of wild, unconnected, trifling thoughts pouring in upon the mind, without even the feeble fence of one sober consideration or reflection to resist it.

Thus does Satan *catch away the seed* from hearts indisposed to receive it. He tempts, and they fall in with the temptation. He plays upon the imagination by surrounding objects or by impertinent ideas suggested to the mind, and they are pleased with what they little suspect to be the artifice of this subtle adversary. Instead of watching each avenue of the soul, they throw open the door to every vile intruder, and revel
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* Prov. xvii. 24.

in the most wanton and dissipated company, while they are supposed to be sitting attentively at the feet of divine instruction. So this mighty enemy sets up his standard in their bosoms, and bids defiance to the counsels, reproofs, and exhortations of God's word. So he holds his miserable vassals fast in the chains of ignorance and unbelief. And so they go away from the house of God as uninformed, unaffected, and unimproved as they came thither.

How lamentable the case of these hearers! But however stupid they may remain for a while, conscience will by and by rouse, and do its office. The day is coming when this sad abuse of the means of religion will be recollected with pungent grief. They will *mourn at the last*, to use the words of Solomon, *when their flesh and their body are consumed*, and they will say, "How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof? And have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined my ear to them that instructed me? I was almost in all evil, in the midst of the congregation and the assembly *."

2. Satan uses every art to excite and inflame men's prejudices against the word they hear.

Pride and pleasure are passions that predominate in the human heart: whatever therefore opposes them must needs be irksome, and cannot gain admission to the mind without many painful struggles. Now the gospel stands directly opposed to these criminal passions. It brings indeed glad tidings of great joy, and is accompanied with sufficient evidence. But then it teaches the most humiliating and self-denying truths—that we are all miserably ignorant, guilty, and depraved; that we are wholly indebted for our hope of escaping

* Prov. v. 11,--14.

caping the wrath to come and acquiring the happiness of heaven, to the free grace of God through the mediation of Christ; that we must humbly renounce all merit at the feet of divine mercy, and “submit ourselves to the righteousness of God*.”—It teaches that, as it is most reasonable, we should exert every power in the pursuit of heavenly blessings, so “it is God that worketh in us to will and to do of his good pleasure †;” and that it is “by grace we are saved, through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God ‡.”—And it further teaches, that if we will be the disciples of Christ, we must “deny ourselves, and take up our cross and follow him ||;” must prefer intellectual and spiritual to carnal and sensual pleasures, renounce the pomps and vanities of the world, and in the painful discipline of the heart, and patient submission to trouble, adhere to our divine Master and his interest to the end. Such is the word of the kingdom, to which there is a deep-rooted aversion in the hearts of men; an aversion so confirmed in some by the indulgence of criminal passions, that it is almost unconquerable.

Now, in order to prevent a person’s becoming a convert to religion, if he is not to be dissuaded from frequenting public worship, or if when there, his attention is not to be wholly diverted from the word by any of the artifices just mentioned; what is to be done? Why, an artful enemy, could he have access to the mind, would suggest all those ideas to it that are adapted to rouse that aversion to the gospel of which we have been speaking, and which, once roused, would not fail to indispose the mind to a calm and impartial attention

* Rom. x. 3.

† Philip. ii. 13.

‡ Ephes. ii. 8.

|| Luke ix. 23.

attention to the reasoning of the preacher. He would address the passions of pride and pleasure in every possible way. He would make every imaginable circumstance tend to his purpose. He would give an unfavourable cast to the doctrine, person, abilities, views, voice, and attitude of the speaker; and to the character, sense, manners, and rank of his audience. These he would place in such a disgusting light as to provoke contempt, if not abhorrence. He would whisper in his ear such language as this: ‘What! become a convert to a doctrine that affronts your reason and good sense, degrades you to the rank of brutes, yea beneath it, makes you a mere machine, or at best tells you, that you must be a fool for Christ’s sake! Will you be a dupe to this idle declaimer, and a fellow disciple with these mad enthusiasts? Will you sacrifice all your just pretensions to wit, sense, and ingenuity, and all your prospects of honour, wealth, and pleasure? Will you be content to take your lot among a company of ill-natured, conceited fools, or perhaps designing knaves, who monopolize the favour of Heaven to themselves, and deal out their anathemas without mercy on all others? Will you be so lost to all refined reason, and manly courage, as to become a snivelling penitent, a senseless devotee, a bigotted religionist? Will you tear yourself from all your former gay, cheerful, and respectable connections, part with a present certainty, for the chimeras of futurity, and spend your remaining days in contempt, gloominess, and sorrow? If so, then listen to what these people say, implicitly believe their doctrine, and henceforth give yourself up tamely to the guidance of blind impulse and passion.’ Such would be the language of this artful deceiver.

That such thoughts have arisen in the minds of multitudes while the gospel has been soberly preached, and they upon the point of paying some attention to its reasonings and expostulations, can scarce be doubted. And why we should not admit that satan may have an influence to suggest them, I know not. Of this, however, I am sure, that the language in our text looks strongly that way—"the wicked one cometh and catcheth away that which was sown in the heart." But permit me again to observe, that these measures of the great adversary cannot succeed, without the consent of the unhappy man on whom he practises them.—Once more,

3. Another artifice satan uses to counteract the influence of God's word on men's hearts, is *to prevent their recollecting it* after they have heard it.

More depends upon the duty of recollection and self-application than men commonly apprehend. If indeed the end of preaching were only to rouse the passions by a blind kind of impulse, without the communication of any knowledge to the mind, or the fixing any solid conviction on the judgment and conscience; I do not see what great good would result from recollection. In that case, all my business would be to recover those sensations of terror and astonishment, or of admiration and joy, which were created in my breast by the tone, gesture, and eagerness of the speaker. And what advantage it would be to me afterwards, any more than at the time of hearing, to possess these merely mechanical sensations, I am at a loss to say. But if the end of preaching is, by informing the understanding and convincing the judgment, to make the heart better; then, upon the same principle that it is men's duty to hear the word attentively,

ly, and to endeavour to the utmost of their power to comprehend it, it is their duty afterwards to recollect the ideas they got, and the impressions that were thereby made upon their affections, while they sat at the feet of instruction.

This would be, in a sense, hearing the word again, hearing it with double advantage, with abiding and substantial effect. The ideas thus revived, the sentiments thus familiarized, the reasoning thus digested, the sacred truths thus applied and brought home to the heart; would, with the blessing of God, produce not only similar feelings, but a further, increasing, effectual, permanent influence upon the temper and life. And indeed it is hard to conceive how a man's understanding should be informed, and his heart deeply impressed with what he has heard, and he not disposed to recover the remembrance of what has passed. Was there ever an instance of any one who received real benefit from a sermon, which he never thought of afterwards? All due allowance is to be made for the irretentiveness of some memories, and the peculiar unfavourableness of some persons' situation and circumstances to the duty I am recommending. But it is a duty most reasonable in itself, earnestly inculcated in Scripture, and if there were a hearty good will to it, would be found to have fewer real obstructions to it than is commonly pretended.

Now we will suppose a person to have heard the word, to have affixed some ideas to it, and to have received some transient impressions from it; in this case what is to be done in order to prevent its salutary effect? Satan is a more subtle, artful enemy than is commonly apprehended. Perceiving this vassal of his on the point of revolting from his service, in a situation

ation far more hazardous than that of another whom he has influence enough to lull fast asleep under the loud calls of the gospel, or of one in whose breast he has address enough to excite those malignant prejudices mentioned under the former particular; perceiving, I say, this liege subject in danger of being torn from his dominion, he must have recourse to other artifices than those already used. And what more natural, what more likely to succeed, than those whereby the remembrance of what has been heard may be erased, and the unhappy man thrown back into exactly the same situation he was before he entered the doors of such Christian assembly? Here various expedients offer directly adapted to the purpose. And if I might be allowed to use figurative language, to give energy to this alarming subject, I would bring forward Satan to view in the most hideous form, issuing his commands to a legion of demons, to seize on this apprehended apostate from his kingdom, to rattle him of every serious thought that occupied his mind, and to bind him fast in the chains of thoughtlessness and dissipation.

If there be truth in religion, it is certainly the most important thing in the whole world. To the man therefore, who begins to be persuaded by what he has heard, not only of the possibility, but the high probability of its truth, it is the language of common sense as well as religion, ‘Go home, retire, call over the matters that have been discoursed of, weigh them in the impartial balance of consideration, search the Scriptures, enquire into your true character and state towards God, look forward to death and judgment, and address your fervent cries to Heaven for mercy.’ Surely there is no enthusiasm in this. It is the language

guage of calm and sober reason. In matters of far less importance than these, admonitions to reflection and consideration, would be deemed prudent and salutary. But alas! the unhappy man of whom we are speaking, though struck by the reasoning of the preacher, as was Felix with the discourse of the apostle Paul, has not resolution to fall in with this advice, so natural, reasonable, and beneficial. He has beheld himself for a moment, in the mirror of truth, trembled at the deformity of his countenance, and faintly wished to take measures for the restoration of the health of his soul: But O sad to think!—he goes away, and forgets what manner of man he is. The soft syren persuasions of a deceitful heart, and a thousand surrounding snares, artfully laid by satan for his ruin, prevail.

He has scarce left the assembly, where a solemn awe had seized his spirit, but some trifling object catches his imagination, sets all his passions afloat, banishes every serious sentiment from his breast, and precipitates him into his former state of levity and inconsideration. Instead of retiring silently to his own mansion, and there calling himself and his family to account, upon the interesting concerns of religion; he is instantly seen in a circle of vain, thoughtless, giddy people, where the subjects of conversation are totally foreign to those which just now occupied his attention. News, dress, amusements, schemes of pleasure or business, or to say the best, trifling remarks on the preacher, the audience, or some singularity in the behaviour of this or that person in the assembly; these are the topics of the evening, and thus is every serious impression erased, and all the benefit to be expected from public instruction entirely lost. Nor is it to be thought strange, the day thus closed without even the forms of

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religion, that the businesſes and amusements of the ſucceeding week, ſhould bury in utter oblivion, the poor ſhadowy remains of a ſerious ſentiment or an heartleſs wiſh about God and another world.

Thus have we ſee by what meaſures ſatan catches away the good ſeed from the hearts of men—by *diverting their attention from the word* while hearing it—by *exciting prejudices in their breasts against it*—and by *preventing their ſeriously recollecting it* afterwards. So we are led to conſider, in the third place, the malevolent end propoſed thereby—“that they might not believe and be ſaved *.” But this, with the improvement of the ſubject, we ſhall refer to the next opportunity.

PART II.

THE character of *inattentive hearers*, and the ſad effect of their criminal indifference to the word, are the ſubjects now under conſideration. “Some ſeeds fell by the way-side, and the fowls came and devoured them up †.” This figurative account of theſe unhappy perſons, is thus expounded by our Lord himſelf ‡, “When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and underſtandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was ſown in his heart: This is he which received ſeed by the way-side.” We have explained the words, and made ſome general obſervations upon them. So we have proceeded to the main thing, which is the conſideration of the three following enquiries—Who *the wicked one* is, and why he is ſo called?—By what *arts* he endeavours to prevent the efficacy of God’s word on the hearts of men?—And the malevolent *end* he propoſes thereby? Satan

* Luke viii. 12:

† Matt. xiii. 4.

‡ Ver. 19.

tan or the devil, is *the wicked one* here intended ; and with what propriety he is so styled, appears from the view we have taken of his character, history and works. " He catcheth away the good seed of the word." This he does, we have shewn, by *diverting mens attention from it—exciting prejudices in their breasts against it—and preventing their recollecting it afterwards.* We proceed now,

III. To consider the malevolent end proposed thereby—" Lest they should believe and be saved * ;" or, in other words, that they might still be held under the power of unbelief and sin, and so be lost for ever. Horrid cruelty !

Here, in order the more deeply to impress our minds, with the importance of giving the most serious attention to the word, it will be proper to enquire what *faith* is—to describe the *salvation* promised to them who believe--and to shew you the *connection* between the one and the other.

FIRST, What is *faith* ? I answer, it is a firm persuasion of the truth of the gospel, accompanied with a deep sense of its importance, and a cordial acceptance of its gracious proposals ; and so producing the genuine fruits of love and obedience.

The term *believe* is of plain and easy import ; so well understood, that, in common discourse, no one pauses a moment to enquire what we mean by it. Nor is it imaginable, that the sacred writers use words, in any other sense than is agreeable with their general acceptation ; for if they did, the Bible would be a book absolutely unintelligible. It is however certain, that, as the Scriptures assure us, that he who believes shall be saved ; so they speak of some who believe, and yet

* Luke viii. 12.

yet are not saved. From whence it follows, either that the term itself has two different acceptations, or rather, that the faith of the one is accompanied with certain attributes or qualities different from that of the other; so that though they are both said to believe, their real characters are clearly and essentially distinguishable. Now, if we will spend a few moments in examining the definition of faith just given, we shall be enabled to draw the line between the mere nominal and the genuine Christian, the man who believes to no valuable purpose, and him "who believes to the saving of the soul*."

The real Christian believes. But what does he believe? I answer the pure unadulterated gospel; the sum and substance of which is this, that "God is in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them †;" or, in other words, that of his free mercy, for the sake alone of what Christ has done and suffered, he pardons, justifies, and saves the believing penitent sinner. This plain truth he clearly apprehends, though a stranger to a thousand curious questions that have been agitated about it.

But upon what ground does he believe the gospel? It is replied, the testimony of God. The external evidence of Christianity, I mean that of miracle and prophecy, strikes him upon a general view of it as clear and convincing. But if he has neither ability nor leisure to enter so fully into it as others may have, yet that defect is supplied by the internal evidence of it, brought home to his own perception, reasoning, and experience. He sees it is a doctrine according to godliness, tending to make men holy and happy, and he finds that it has this effect, in a degree at least, on his

* Heb. x. 39.

† 2 Cor. v. 19.

his own heart : and from thence he concludes that it is divine. And this I take to be *the witness* of which the apostle John speaks : “ He that believeth on the Son of God, hath the witness in himself *.”

It is natural further, as faith admits of degrees, to enquire what degree of assent he yields to the gospel ? Not a faint, feeble, wavering assent ; but a firm assent, agreeable to the clearness, strength, and energy of the evidence. He may indeed be assaulted with doubts, nor does he wish to suppress them by unlawful means, such as sound reason condemns. He is open to enquiry, ever ready to follow where truth shall lead. But his doubts, having had in this case their full effect, serve rather in the end to confirm than weaken his faith : just like a tree, whose roots having taken fast hold on the ground, becomes firmer by being shaken of a mighty wind.

Again, the gospel which he thus believes, he believes also to be most important. It is not in his apprehension a trifling uninteresting matter. On the contrary, as it involves in it the most serious truths, which affect his well-being both here and hereafter ; so it rouses his attention, and calls all the powers of his soul into action. Like a man whose house is on fire, and is at his wits end till he has found means to extinguish it ; or like one who has a large estate depending, and uses every effort to get his title to it confirmed ; so he treats this gospel which he is persuaded is divine.

His belief too of the gospel is accompanied with a cordial approbation of its gracious proposals. He readily falls in with that scheme of salvation which divine wisdom has contrived, and almighty power has carried

* 1 John v. 10.

carried into effect. At the altar of propitiation he is disposed to sacrifice both pride and pleasure, and at the feet of the adorable Saviour “to cast down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God *.” While some, “ignorant of God’s righteousness, go about to establish their own righteousness, he submits himself to the righteousness of God †.” And while others, under a pretence of doing honour to the free grace of God, throw the reins on the neck of their vicious inclinations, it is his object to be saved as well from the dominion of sin as the guilt of it. To the instructions of Jesus, the all-wise prophet of the church, he devoutly listens; on his sacrifice, as his great high priest, he firmly relies; and to his government, as his only rightful sovereign, he cheerfully yields obedience.—And from hence it may be naturally concluded, that the general course of his life is holy, useful, and ornamental.

In fine, upon this view of the matter we clearly see with what propriety the Scriptures affirm, that “they who believe on the name of Christ, are born of God ‡;” that “faith is the gift of God §;” that “it is of the operation of God ¶;” and that “it is given unto us in the behalf of Christ to believe on him ¶¶.” So that there appears good ground for the natural and usual distinction between a mere *historical* and a *divine* faith.

And now if we reverse what has been said, we shall plainly see the difference between the two characters of the real and the speculative Christian; and how it happens that the latter is said in Scripture to believe, though he believes not to the saving of his soul.

If it be enquired, then, of the man of this character
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* 2 Cor. x. 5.

† Rom. x. 3.

‡ John i. 12, 13.

§ Ephes. ii. 8.

¶ Col. ii. 12.

¶¶ Philip. i. 29.

what it is he believes, it will perhaps be found that his idea of the gospel is a very mistaken one, or however that a great deal of error is mingled with the truth.

Or if this be not the case, and his notions are in general agreeable to Scripture, yet there is a defect in the grounds of his faith. It is not the result of impartial enquiry, and a serious regard to the authority of God; but of a concurrence of accidental circumstances. ‘The Christian religion is the religion of his country; he was born of Christian parents; his neighbours, friends, and relations are of this profession; and many good and learned men have told him, he may depend upon it the gospel is true.’ I mean not by this to insinuate, that these considerations may not properly create a presumptive evidence in favour of Christianity, and that they ought not to serve as inducements to further enquiry. But surely a faith that stands on this foundation alone, is not a divine faith, nor that faith to which the promise of salvation is so solemnly made in the New Testament.

Further, his assent to what he calls the gospel, though it may have in it all the obstinacy and tenaciousness of bigotry, is yet destitute of that manly firmness which is the result of free examination, and full conviction. So that his creed, be it ever so orthodox, and his zeal for it ever so flaming, is after all rather his opinion or sentiment, than the matter of his sober and serious belief.

And then, in regard of that deep sense of the importance of divine truth which always accompanies a divine faith, he is a perfect stranger to it. His character is the reverse of that of the Thessalonians, “to whom the gospel came, not in word only, but in power
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and in the Holy Ghost *." It makes little other impression on his heart, than that a man receives from an idle tale he hears, and almost instantly forgets, unless, indeed, the eagerness and pride of party-zeal happens, as was just observed, to create in his breast a warm and obstinate attachment to his profession.

To which it must be added, that however, through various indirect causes or motives, he is induced to assent to the gospel, he does not heartily fall in with its gracious proposals. He neither relies entirely on Christ as his Saviour, renouncing all merit of his own, nor yet cordially submits to his authority, approving of all his commands as most holy, just, and good.—And from hence it is to be concluded, that his external conduct, in regard of humility, meekness, temperance, benevolence, and the other Christian graces, hath little in it to distinguish him from the rest of mankind.

Thus have we contrasted the two characters of the real, and the merely nominal Christian; the man who believes to the saving of the soul, and him who, though he may be said to believe, yet believes not to any salutary or valuable purpose. And hence, I think, we may collect a just idea of the nature and properties of saving faith.

And now, Sirs, let us examine ourselves upon this important question. We have heard the gospel. Have we believed it? Have we received it in the love of it? and are our hearts and lives influenced and governed by it? We know not what true faith is, if the great concerns of religion do not strike us as infinitely more interesting and important than the most weighty affairs of the present life; if we do not feel
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* 1 Theff. i. 5.

and acknowledge our guilt, depravity, and weakness; if we do not most cheerfully entrust our everlasting concern to the hands of Jesus Christ, as our only Saviour and friend; and if it is not our ardent desire to conform to his will, and to copy after his example. And how deplorable will our condition be, should we at last be found in a state of unbelief and sin! But I hope better things of you, Sirs, and things that accompany salvation, though I thus speak. There are many, I trust, among us who do believe in the sense of the New Testament. Give me leave, my friends, to congratulate you on your happiness; while at the same time I tenderly sympathise with those who are weak in faith; but who yet, amidst all their doubts and fears, join issue with him in the gospel, who “cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief*.”—Let us now from this account of faith go on,

SECONDLY, To speak of *the salvation* promised to them that believe.

Here a scene the most delightful and transporting opens to our view; a scene, the contemplation of which in the present life fills the Christian with admiration and wonder, but will overwhelm him with ecstasy and joy in the world to come. But we can only glance at it in this discourse. General, however, and imperfect as our account of it must be, it will serve to shew the indispensable necessity of faith, and of consequence the importance of giving earnest heed to the things we hear, lest at any time we should let them slip.

Now this salvation, whether we consider it in reference to the evils we escape, or the opposite good to

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* Mark ix. 24.

which we become entitled, is most glorious indeed. It infinitely surpasses every thing we read of in history. What was the deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt, their protection and support through the wilderness, and their conquest of Canaan, with the freedom, prosperity, and happiness they enjoyed there; what, I say, were these events, however splendid and miraculous, but imperfect shadows, faint preludes, of that great salvation wrought out for us by Jesus, the Son of God? It is a salvation from *moral, natural, and penal* evil, in their utmost extent; and that followed with the enjoyment of positive blessedness in its highest perfection.

1. It is a salvation from *moral* evil.

The soul of man is the workmanship of God, and in its construction the skill and power of the great Architect is wonderfully displayed. But, alas! this temple of the living God, once honoured with his presence, is now laid in ruins. Sin, with a long train of miseries, has entered the heart, and taken possession of it. It has darkened the understanding, perverted the judgment, enslaved the will, and polluted the affections. It has dethroned reason, brought a load of guilt upon the conscience, created a thousand painful anxieties and fears in the breast, and spread universal anarchy through the soul.

Now from all these evils we are saved by our Lord Jesus Christ. He procures for us the free pardon of our sins, reinstates us upon equitable grounds, in the favour of our offended Sovereign, and sends down his good Spirit into our hearts, to renew our nature, and make us meet for heaven. His doctrine illuminates the benighted mind, restores peace to the troubled conscience, gives a new bent to the will, and directs the

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the passions to their proper objects. What a blessed change is this ! But the salvation thus begun, arrives not to perfection in the present life. Light and darkness, faith and unbelief, hope and fear, joy and sorrow, are here blended together. And hence the errors, follies, and sins, which the best-of men are chargeable with, and which they so pungently lament at the feet of divine mercy.

Death, however, the friend not the enemy of the believer, shall set the captive soul at liberty, and restore the immortal spirit to its primitive rectitude and purity. At that happy moment, the Christian shall be freed from all remains of ignorance, imperfection, and sin. No evil thought, no vain imagination, no irregular desire, shall ever any more afflict his heart, or disturb his devotion. His intellectual faculties shall become capable of the noblest exertions, and his affections be unalterably fixed to the supreme Good. The image of the blessed God shall be fully delineated on his soul, and in the contemplation and fruition of that great Being, he shall be employed to all eternity. Thus the salvation begun here in sadness and sorrow, shall be finally completed in everlasting happiness and glory.--Again,

2. It is a salvation from *natural* evil.

Many and great are the miseries of an outward kind, to which human nature is liable in the present life. This is a fact not to be denied ; proofs arise from every quarter. If we look into the histories of former times, we shall find the greater part of them employed in relating the calamities which have befallen nations and public bodies of men ; the ravages of war, and the devastations occasioned by fire, tempest, earthquake, pestilence, and famine. If we go-abroad into the world,

world, among the various orders of mankind, our attention will every now and then be arrested, and our sympathetic feelings excited by scenes of distress, too painful to be particularly described—families sinking into all the wretchedness of poverty—parents following their only children to the grave—widows pouring their unavailing tears over their helpless offspring—here a friend deprived of his reason and his liberty, and there another languishing on a bed of sickness and death. No wonder these, and many other calamities we are the witnesses of, cast a gloom over our countenances, and imbitter our pleasanter enjoyments. And then, if we consider our own frame, the materials of which these tabernacles are composed, the disastrous accidents we are subject to, those harbingers of death, sickness and pain, which are continually advancing towards us, and death itself, with the many distressing circumstances that often accompany it; when, I say, we consider these things, we can hardly avoid crying out, in the language of the afflicted patriarch, “Man that is born of a woman, is of few days and full of trouble *.”

Now from all these miseries, the sad effects of sin, the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to save us. Not that good men are exempted from the common afflictions of life. Poverty, sickness, and death, they are liable to, as well as others. But none of these calamities befall them in the manner they do the wicked. From curses they are converted into blessings, and for Christ's sake they become salutary chastisements, instead of vindictive judgments. If their heavenly Father corrects them, it is, that they may be partakers of his holiness; nor does he fail to provide them

* Job xiv. 1.

them with all needful supports under their afflictions. And they are assured, that however death, the greatest of all natural evils, is not to be avoided, yet it shall do them no harm. Nor are we without many glorious instances of those, who, through the faith of the gospel, have triumphed over the king of terrors, while executing his last commission upon them. With the apostle, in the most heroic strains, they have thus challenged the last enemy, “ O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ *.”

But let us extend our views to the heavenly world, where the promise of salvation, as it relates to natural evils, shall receive its full accomplishment. When the Israelites entered the good land, they ceased from their labours, and enjoyed all that tranquillity and happiness they had so long expected. In like manner, “ there remaineth also a rest to the people of God †.” When the journey of life is ended, there will be an end to all the pains, fatigues, and dangers of it. We shall no more endure any of those miseries we have been describing, or be the sad spectators of the sorrows and sufferings of others. In that happy world, there is not one aching heart, not one weeping eye, not one complaining tongue. As the stones that composed the temple at Jerusalem, were hewn and prepared before they were brought thither; that the noise of a hammer might not be heard throughout the building: so, the painful exercises of the present life, whereby good men are made meet for heaven, having had their full effect, will for ever cease, and no sound will be

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heard

* 1 Cor. xv. 55, 56, 57.

† Heb. iv. 9

heard there, but the voice of joy and gladness. And on the morning of the resurrection, the body, roused from the slumbers of the grave, and fashioned like unto the glorious body of Christ, shall be reunited to the immortal spirit; and in that happy union enjoy uninterrupted health and vigour to all eternity.—We have now only to add, in order to complete our account of this salvation, that it is,

3. A deliverance also from *penal* evil.

Indeed, the evils just described, may very properly be denominated penal, as they are the effects of sin, and expressions of the just displeasure of Heaven against them. But what I have here in view, is the punishment to be inflicted on the wicked in the world to come, and the joys prepared for the righteous, among the blessed above. It is but a general account we can now give of these two states: a transient glance, however, at the one and the other, will suffice to convince us, that the salvation promised to them that believe is infinitely great and glorious.

The Scriptures, in order to awaken the attention of mankind to their future and everlasting interests, have given us the most alarming description of the punishment prepared for the impenitent and ungodly. They assure us, that “the anger of the Lord, and his jealousy, shall smite against them* ;” that “he will cast snares, fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest upon them † ;” that “they shall be destroyed for ever ‡ ;” that “they shall eat of the fruits of their own way, and be filled with their own devices || ;” that “they shall awake to shame and everlasting contempt § ;” that, “not having brought forth good fruit,

* Deut. xxix. 20.

† Psal. xi. 5, 6.

‡ Psal. xxxvii. 38.

|| Prov. i. 31.

§ Dan. xii. 2.

fruit, they shall be hewn down, and cast into the fire * ;” that “ they shall be cast into outer darkness, where is weeping and gnashing of teeth † ;” and that “ they shall go away into everlasting punishment ‡ .” These, and many other expressions of the like import, are meant to convey some idea to our minds, of the extreme anguish of the damned : stripped of all the comforts they here enjoyed, and abused ; shut up in the prison of hell, with spirits of the same fierce and malevolent dispositions as themselves ; abandoned to the reproaches of their own self-accusing consciences ; and oppressed with the most tremendous sense of the indignation of that great Being, whom they still continue to hate, but feel themselves utterly unable to resist. “ Who knoweth the power of thine anger, O Lord ? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath || .”—But from all these miseries, the deplorable effects of impenitence and unbelief, our great Emmanuel saves us. “ There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus § :” for “ he hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us ¶ .”—But more than this—

To the miseries we have been describing are to be opposed the joys and triumphs of heaven. The Christian at death, freed from all moral pollution, and restored to his primitive rectitude, as we have shewn under a former head, is admitted into the immediate presence of God, and the glorious society of the blessed. There he is ever employed in contemplating the divine excellencies in all their perfection, in beholding the adorable Jesus, his Saviour and friend, in all his
mediatorial

* Matt. iii. 10.

† Matt. viii. 12.

‡ Matt. xxv. 46.

|| Psal. xc. 11.

§ Rom. viii. 1.

¶ Gal. iii. 13.

mediatorial glory, and in conversing with an innumerable company of angels and spirits of just men made perfect. And O! what tongue can describe, what imagination conceive, the transporting joys he feels, resulting from the most intimate union with the great Fountain of all good, and the most perfect sense of his favour and love impressed on his heart? "In thy presence," says David, "is fulness of joy, at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore *."

Such then, is the salvation promised to them that believe. Oh! how should our hearts exult, while our ears are saluted with these blessed tidings!—guilt pardoned—innocence retrieved—the image of God restored—the powers of sin and death vanquished—soul and body made for ever happy and glorious—and all this effected at an expence, that neither men nor angels can compute. But I forbear.—Some notice must now be taken,

THIRDLY, of the *connection* between faith and salvation. It is necessary, in order to our being saved, that we believe. Now this necessity arises out of the divine appointment, and the reason and nature of the thing.

1. It is the will of God, that those who are saved should believe.

His pleasure in this matter he has signified to us in language the most plain and decisive. "God so loved the world," says our Lord to Nicodemus, "that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life *." And when he commands his apostles, as he was ascending up into heaven, to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature; he adds, "He that be-
lieveth

* Psal. xvi. 11.

† John iii. 16.

lieveth, and is baptized, shall be saved ; but he that believeth not shall be damned *.” The authority of the blessed God to dictate to us in any case, is unquestionable ; but more especially in a matter so interesting to us as this, and in which the riches of his mercy and love are so wonderfully displayed. Nor is it a mere arbitrary command, but the result of infinite wisdom and goodness, as we shall presently see. In the mean time, it is to be remarked of many temporal salvations recorded in the Bible, which were presages of that more glorious one we are discoursing of, that they who were to be benefited by these extraordinary interpositions of divine providence, were required to believe. When the Israelites approached the Red Sea, under the most tremendous apprehensions of the event, mountains rising on either side of them, and an enraged enemy in their rear ; Moses commands them “ to stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord †,” that is, to believe. When the brazen serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, for the healing those who had been bitten of the fiery flying serpents ; proclamation was made through the camp, that *whoever looked to it, that is, believed, should live ‡*. And when Jehoshaphat led out his troops against a far more numerous host of enemies, assured that God would by a miraculous interposition subdue them ; he commands the people, as Moses had done in the instance just mentioned, “ to stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord :” adding, “ Believe in the Lord your God, so shall you be established ; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper ||.” Nor is it to be forgot, that our Lord Jesus Christ, when here on earth, required faith of them upon-

* Mark xvi 16.

† Exod. xiv. 13.

‡ Num. xxi. 8, 9.

|| 2 Chron. xx. 17, 20.

on whose bodies he wrought miraculous cures : which cures afforded a lively emblem, and a happy omen, of those more noble cures his gospel is adapted to effect on the souls of men.—But,

2. There is a fitness or suitability in faith to the end of its appointment, so that the necessity of it arises out of the nature of the thing itself.

If God of his infinite mercy is disposed to save us, and has assured us of this by a message from heaven, authenticated by the clearest evidence ; it is no doubt our interest and duty to listen to the message and give full credit to it. If he has sent no less a person than his own Son into the world to redeem us and make us happy, and if he possesses all necessary powers to accomplish that great and good design ; it is surely most fit and reasonable that we should confide in him, and exercise all those regards towards him which his various characters and offices demand. No sober man who contemplates faith, accompanied with those dispositions and affections necessary to constitute a real Christian, can pronounce it an unreasonable and useless thing. But what I have here principally to observe is, that the great blessings of the gospel cannot be enjoyed without the medium of faith. It is true indeed, sin is atoned, Satan vanquished, and the gates of heaven opened to us, and all this by means we had no concern in devising or carrying into effect. But then the actual possession of the good thus procured for us, is as necessary as an equitable title to it. And how is that good to be possessed without a temper of heart suited to the enjoyment of it ? And how is this temper to be acquired but by believing ? Here I might shew you the concern which faith has in the conversion of a sinner to God, and in all those exercises of the mind and

and heart whereby he is gradually prepared for the heavenly blessedness : at the same time observing, that neither faith itself, nor any of those pious affections or good works which spring from it, have any meritorious influence in his salvation. But our present design will not allow us to enter any further into this subject.

Thus have we considered the nature of faith, described the salvation promised to it, and shewn the connection between the one and the other. Let us now return to the argument in the text.

Satan clearly perceiving the influence of faith in the great business of salvation, and well knowing too that faith comes by hearing ; uses all those artifices mentioned in the former sermon to divert men's attention from the word, and to prevent its salutary effect upon their hearts. " He catches it away, lest they should believe and be saved." As in the beginning he seduced our first parents from their allegiance to God, in order to deprive them of the happiness they enjoyed ; so he now uses his utmost endeavour to counteract the measures devised for the salvation of their posterity. Glad would he be to precipitate the whole human race into the same abyss of darkness and misery with himself, and no means within his power will he leave untried in order to compass his malevolent purpose.

Suffer me then, O ye careless hearers of the word, to remind you a moment of the awful consequences of that impenitence and unbelief in which he wishes to confirm you, by all the arts he uses to dissuade you from attention and consideration.

If ye will oppose the clear evidence of the gospel, and shut your ears against its loud calls, and gracious invitations ; if ye will listen to the false reasonings of him who was a liar from the beginning, and reject the
salutary

salutary admonitions of Christ and his apostles; if ye will “tread under foot the Son of God, and count the blood of the covenant an unholy thing;” and if ye will, notwithstanding all the remonstrances of reason and conscience, “do despite unto the Spirit of grace:” ye must endure the punishment due to such accumulated guilt, and horrid ingratitude. “There remains no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking-for of judgment, and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries*.” “The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven, with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power †.” Consider, O consider these things; and the Lord give you understanding.

It now remains that we make two or three reflections on the general subject of this discourse.

I. If satan takes the measures you have heard, to prevent the success of the gospel, and to confirm men in impenitence and unbelief; how truly is he denominated by our Saviour “the wicked one;” and how righteous is that sentence which will shortly be executed upon him!

Every step we have taken in our account of the methods by which he deludes that class of hearers we are discoursing of, establishes the evidence that has been deduced from Scripture of his malevolence. What can be more horribly cruel and malignant, than to lay every possible snare to beguile the ignorant, and practise upon all the depraved passions of pride and pleasure to ruin the thoughtless; to throw every imaginable

* Heb. x. 26,---31.

† 2 Thess. i. 7, 8, 9.

ginable obstruction in the way of men's attending to their best interests, and excite in their breasts every unreasonable prejudice against the only means of salvation; and to pursue these measures uniformly in every age and country where the gospel is preached, flattering himself with the hope of alleviating his own misery, by precipitating others into endless perdition! Yea, so determined is this miserable enemy upon carrying his infernal purposes into effect, that one of his machinations, and not the least, is to persuade men that his existence is a mere chimera; or however, if he does exist, that he has it not in his power to tempt them, and therefore is not chargeable with that guilt which entitles him to the denomination of "the wicked one." What a monster of iniquity! If the character of a seducer among men is held in detestation, how much more detestable is the character of this arch-seducer! If it is the voice of all that a murderer should not live, what tenfold vengeance is he deserving of, who has been a murderer from the beginning, and has slain his thousands of thousands! Well! the day is coming, when "the devil who thus deceived the children of men, shall be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, and be tormented day and night for ever. And then shall be heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Hallelujah, salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: for true and righteous are his judgments *."

2. How much is it to be lamented, that men will suffer themselves to be deceived and ruined by the devices of this great adversary!

Permit us, O ye thoughtless, inconsiderate hearers of the word, to expostulate with you for a moment.

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The compassionate Jesus, who came to seek and to save that which was lost, has deigned himself to apprize you of your danger, and at the same time taken care to let you know, that, subtle and powerful as this enemy is, he cannot carry his point without your consent. Your danger is great, and the rather as your nature is depraved, and you are surrounded with a thousand snares of which satan knows how to make his advantage. But do not excuse yourselves of blame, by pleading your incompetence to resist so mighty an adversary. To be tempted is not your sin, but it is your sin to comply with the temptation. You may, you can, you ought to be on your guard. Indisposed as you are to attend to your best interests, you are capable of hearing us, and of considering the force of our reasonings.

Why, O why, will ye thrust all these things from your minds? Should what we say prove to be true, what an addition will it be to your misery to reflect, in the great day of account, that your heart despised reproof, and that you would not incline your ear to them that instructed you! Realize that day. Be persuaded that it will come. It is however not yet come. Now, now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation. The truths we preach may be painful to you, and to urge them upon you merely for the sake of giving you pain, would be cruel. But if the attentive consideration of them will be salutary to you, (and we firmly believe that such is their tendency,) can you wonder that we are importunate with you? Make the trial. If you never before listened to a sermon, O be persuaded to listen to this! Carry it away with you. Revolve it in your mind. Examine

mine what we have said by the tests of impartial reason, and the sacred Scriptures. And, bowing your knee at the feet of the great God, earnestly beseech him, for Christ's sake, to assist you in your conflicts with this subtle adversary, and the deceitful reasonings of your own hearts. You have every imaginable encouragement so to do. And should you succeed, how glorious will your triumph be over sin and the powers of darkness!

3. And lastly, Let us admire and adore the grace of God which defeats the designs of Satan, and makes the word effectual upon the hearts of multitudes, notwithstanding all the opposition it meets with.

Many a one who has been induced to hear the gospel by motives of mere curiosity, has nevertheless received salutary and abiding impressions from it. He has entered the assembly with a thoughtless and dissipated mind, and has gone away with a heart deeply affected with his everlasting concerns. The providence of God in so disposing external circumstances, as that such persons should hear the word, and the grace of God in setting it home with energy on their hearts, cannot be enough devoutly acknowledged, and gratefully remembered. Nor is there an instance of any one, ¹savingly benefited by the instructions and invitations of the gospel, who will not readily admit the truth of what the apostle asserts, that as it is our duty “to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, so it is God that worketh in us to will and to do of his good pleasure *.”—And how very pleasing to think, that, however in too many sad instances ministers have occasion to complain, “Who hath believed

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* Phil. ii. 12, 13.

our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed *??" the day is hastening on, when an infinite multitude shall acknowledge with hosannas of the loudest praise, that the word of the kingdom, though treated by many with indifference and contempt, was the power of God to their everlasting salvation.

* Isa. liii. 1.

DIS-

DISCOURSE III.

THE CHARACTER OF ENTHUSIASTIC HEARERS CONSIDERED.

MAT. xiii. 5, 6.

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth : and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth. And when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had not root they withered away.

OUR Saviour's view in this parable is, to lay open the principles, motives, and conduct of the various sorts of persons who hear the gospel. The characters he draws are four—the INATTENTIVE—the ENTHUSIASTIC—the WORLDLY-MINDED—the SINCERE. The first of these we have considered, and proceed now,

SECONDLY, to the ENTHUSIASTIC, or those upon whom, to appearance, the word has an instantaneous and mighty effect, but who, yet, reap no real advantage from it.

The temper and conduct of these persons are strikingly represented in the text, which our Saviour thus expounds * : “ He that received the seed into stony

places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it : yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while : for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended." Here are four things to be distinctly considered.

I. The character of these hearers previous to their hearing the word :

II. The effect it instantly produces on their minds :

III. Their failure afterwards : and,

IV. The cause of their apostasy. We begin,

I. With the character of these hearers previous to their hearing the word.

They are compared to *stony* or *rocky* ground *, which is unfavourable to cultivation ; but yet has a *little* mould or *earth* cast over it, suited to receive seed, and in which it may lodge a while, and disseminate itself. So that this ground is partly bad and partly good. And thus are very aptly described, the miserably perverse and depraved state of the will, on the one hand, and the warmth and liveliness of the natural passions, on the other. These qualities often meet in one and the same person, and bear a different aspect to religion, the one being unfavourable and the other favourable to it.

I. It is true of these hearers that their will is wretchedly depraved.

Stone is a figure used in Scripture, to signify the obstinate aversion of the mind to what is holy and good. So Ezekiel speaks of a *stony heart*, in opposition to a "heart of flesh † : " and Paul, of the living epistles of Christ being written, not on *tables of stone*, but "fleshly tables of the heart ‡". There is in persons of this character,

* Luke viii. 6.

† Ezek. xxxvi. 26.

‡ 2 Cor. iii. 3.

character, a certain prejudice against serious religion, which perversely resists all reasonings, expostulations, and persuasions respecting it. "Their carnal minds are enmity against God, for they are not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be *." "Their words are stout against God †." They say, "Who is the Lord that we should obey his voice ‡?" "What is the Almighty that we should serve him ||?" "We will not have God to reign over us §." "We will walk after our own devices, and we will every one, do the imagination of his evil heart ¶." Thus "they make their faces harder than a rock **," and "their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law ††." "They are stiff-hearted, rebellious and impudent ‡‡;" not only "alienated from the life of God, but," in some instances, "past feeling ||||."

What a miserable state of the human mind is this! Hearts thus set on iniquity, and thus unyielding to the dictates of conscience, providence, and the Scriptures, may well be compared to *stony, flinty, rocky* ground. There are indeed degrees of depravity, and some men, through sinful indulgence, become more stupid than others; so that their consciences are said to be "seared with a hot iron §§." But it is true of all, while in a natural state, that their will is averse to that which is good. They do not with their mind serve God, and they will not come unto Christ that they may have life. Wherefore the figurative language of the text, applies to the sort of hearers we are now discoursing of, in common with all others in an unrenewed state.

—And

* Rom. viii. 7.

† Mal. iii. 13.

‡ Exod. v. 2.

|| Job xxi. 15.

§ Luke xix. 14.

¶ Jer. xviii. 12.

** Jer. v. 3.

†† Zech. vii. 12.

‡‡ Ezek. ii. 3, 4.

|||| Eph. iv. 18, 19.

§§ 1 Tim. iv. 2.

--And yet, with all this depravity of the will, they have,

2. Warm and lively passions ; a circumstance in itself not a little favourable to religion.

This is admirably expressed, by the earth or mould said to be cast over the rock, which was of a nature so rich and luxuriant, that the seed instantly mingled with it, and expanding, sprung up, and created a beautiful verdure which promised great fruitfulness. Nothing was wanting to produce the desired effect, but a sufficient depth of earth. Had the ground at bottom been properly cultivated, this fine mould cast upon it, would have assisted and forwarded vegetation ; but that remaining hard and rocky, this had only a temporary effect, and served little other purpose than to deceive the expectation of the husbandman.

Such is truly the case in the matter before us. The heart, like the stony ground, is indisposed to what is good ; and the affections, like the earth cast over it, are warm and lively ; wherefore, the word not entering into the former, and yet mingling with the latter, produces no real fruit, but only the gay and splendid appearance of an external profession. And here it is further to be remarked, that however the passions are of excellent use in religion, if the heart be right with God ; yet, this not being the case, their influence is rather pernicious than salutary : indeed, the more eager and impetuous the natural temper, the greater evil is in this case to be apprehended from it, both to the man himself, and to those with whom he is connected. As to himself, mistaking the warm efforts of mere passion for real religion, he instantly concludes, that he is without doubt a real Christian, and so is essentially injured by the imposition he puts upon himself.

self. And then, his extravagant expressions of rapturous zeal, which, having the colour of exalted piety, strike the eyes of observers with admiration, like the pleasing verdure on the stony ground; these in the end, through his apostasy, bring a foul reproach upon religion, and so deeply wound the hearts of all the real friends of it. And from this view of the subject, we see what it is distinguishes these hearers from those considered in the former discourse: it is the different temperature of their animal spirits and passions. They are both alike indisposed to real religion, but those are cool and reserved, these eager and violent. And it often happens, that the former have a good deal of natural understanding and sagacity, while the latter are remarkable for their weakness and credulity.

But it will be proper, before we pass on, to examine more particularly the character of the Enthusiast. He has a lively imagination, but no judgment to correct it; and warm feelings, but neither wisdom nor resolution to controul them. Struck with appearances, he instantly admits the reality of things, without allowing himself time to enquire into their nature, evidence, and tendency. And impressions thus received, whether from objects presented to the senses, or representations made to the fancy, produce a mighty and instantaneous effect on his passions. These agitate his whole frame, and precipitate him into action, without any intervening consideration, reflection, or prospect. And his actions, under the impulse of a heated imagination, are either right or wrong, useful or pernicious, just as the notions he has thus hastily adopted, happen to be conformable to truth or error. So we shall see the countenance of a man of this complexion kindling into rapture and ecstasy at the idea of something

something new and marvellous ; a flood of tears streaming down his cheeks at the representation of some moving scene of distress ; his face turning pale, and his limbs trembling, at the apprehension of some impending danger ; his whole frame distorted with rage at the hearing of some instance of cruelty ; and his eye sparkling with joy in the prospect of some fancied bliss. Nor is it to be wondered, that one who is wholly at the mercy of these passions, without the guidance of a sober understanding, and the controul of a well-disposed heart, should, as is often the case, break out into loud and clamorous language, assume the most frantic gestures, and be guilty of the most strange and extravagant actions.

Such then is the character of the persons described in our text, previous to their hearing the word. Their hearts, like the *stony ground*, are hard, uncultivated, and indisposed to what is truly good ; and yet they possess lively imaginations, and warm passions, which, like the *fine mould* upon the rock, would be of excellent use in the great business of religion, if it were not for this other essential defect. We proceed therefore,

II. To consider the effect which the word instantly produces on the minds of these persons, as our Saviour has admirably described it.

“ The seed ” that fell on the stony ground “ forthwith sprung up, ” that is, as our Lord expounds it, “ he heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it. ” Here, keeping in our eye the character just drawn, there are three things to be considered—his *receiving the word*—his receiving it *immediately*, as Mark has it—and his receiving it *with joy*. From this account one would be apt at first view to conclude, that this

man is without doubt a real Christian; but the event proves the contrary. Wherefore, it will be necessary to examine very attentively these three particulars.

1. He *receives* the word.

Receiving is a figurative term, and may here be explained of what is the consequence of admitting any doctrine to be true, that is, the professing it. It is indeed used in Scripture to signify faith itself. "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name *." "As ye have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him †." Nor is there any inconvenience in understanding it here of faith. For the hearers our Lord here speaks of do *believe*, and indeed Luke says so expressly ‡. In like manner Simon and many others in Scripture are said to believe, who yet were not real Christians.

Now, as faith has the promise of salvation annexed to it, and as some believe who yet are not saved, a distinction becomes necessary: and the common one of an historical and a divine faith is easy and natural. It respects, as we have shewn at large in a former sermon, the degree of assent which the mind gives to the truth, the grounds of it, the temper with which it is accompanied, the effects it produces, and the influence which brings it into existence. The man whose faith is merely historical, gives only a feeble assent to the truth; his faith is little more than opinion; he believes what is told him, just as I should believe a story of some trifling matter that had happened at a distance, wherein I am no way concerned. Or if he will insist, that his assent to what he calls the gospel, is firm and genuine; yet his notion of the gospel has perhaps a
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* John i. 12.

† Col. ii. 6.

‡ Luke viii. 14.

great deal of error mingled with it. And then, he receives it not upon the divine testimony, or a clear perception of the internal and external evidence of it; but upon the confident assertions of others, whose eagerness and zeal, expressed by their loud voice, and violent gesture, have a mighty effect upon that credulity we spoke of under the former head. Further, his faith is not cordial; it has not the hearty approbation of his judgment and will. Nor does it produce the kindly and acceptable fruits of love and obedience. Yet it is not without its effects, for being of that enthusiastic turn of mind before described, his imagination and passions have a great influence on his profession. Whence those strong appearances of sincerity, earnestness, and zeal, whereby he imposes upon himself and others. Now he loudly affirms he believes, scarcely admitting that man to be a Christian who at all hesitates. Then he treats cool reasoning, and calm reflection, as inimical to religion. And so goes on to pronounce the charge of hypocrisy upon all who fall not in exactly with his notions, and are not as eager in the defence of them as himself. "Come see," says he with Jehu, "my zeal for the Lord of Hosts*." In such sense do these hearers of whom our Saviour speaks in the text, *receive* the word. And if we reverse the character just drawn, we shall have a clear idea of him who receives the truth in the love of it, and who believes to the saving of his soul; remembering at the same time, that as saving faith has divine truth for its object, so it rises into existence through the influence of divine grace.

2. He receives the word *immediately*.

The seed is said in the text to spring up *forthwith*,
and

* 2 Kings x. 16.

and so the idea may respect the quickness of the vegetation. But Mark applies the term *immediately* to the reception of the word. And indeed it is true both of the reception and the operation of it. He receives it not obliquely or circuitously, but *straitly* or directly, as the word signifies *. It is no sooner spoken than it is admitted to be true. A certain predilection in favour of the speaker, his eagerness and positivity, and many other accidental circumstances, beget assent—immediate assent to what he has no clear conception of, and the evidence of which he gives himself no time to consider. He is not embarrassed, as we said before, with any, the least doubt, nor does he feel himself disposed to hesitate, reflect, or compare what he thus hastily and confusedly hears, with the Scriptures of truth. So, without either his judgment being informed, or his will renewed, he is impetuously carried away with a mere sound; his affections are set afloat, and his passions wrought up, he knows not how, into a wild ferment, the effect of which as instantly appears in his countenance, gesture, and conduct. He professes the truth, becomes a flaming defender of it, and out-strips all around him in acts of intemperate zeal, as hastily and inconsiderately done as the word was hastily and inconsiderately received. So his conversion is considered by himself and some other weak people as instantaneous, and on that account not only extraordinary, but the more sure and genuine.—But what deserves our more particular attention, is,

3. His receiving the word *with joy*.

Joy is a pleasing elevation of the spirits, excited by the possession of some present, or the expectation of

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* *Εὐθεως*.

some future good. Now, the gospel is good news, and so adapted to give pleasure to the mind. He therefore who receives it with joy, receives it as it ought to be received. But the man our Saviour here describes is not a real Christian, his joy therefore must have something in it, or in the circumstances accompanying it, distinguishable from that of a genuine believer. Of Herod it is said that "he heard John gladly *:" and from the story it clearly appears Herod remained, notwithstanding, the same profligate man he was before. How then is the joy of the one to be distinguished from that of the other? I answer, by *what precedes it*—by *what excites it*—and by *the effects of it*.

I. Let us consider *what precedes it*.

The real Christian, previous to his enjoying solid peace, is usually much depressed and cast down. Nor is his dejection the effect of bodily disorder, or an ill-temperature of the animal spirits, or of something he can give no rational account of. It is an anxiety occasioned by a sense of sin, an apprehension of God's displeasure, and a fear that he may be denied those spiritual pleasures he earnestly thirsts after. The cause of his trouble is not a chimera, it has a real existence in his breast, it has a painful and regular operation there, and he can reason in a plain sensible manner about it. Now, as the gospel is adapted to relieve the mind of those complaints, and is on that account styled the gospel, or glad tidings, so there are many passages wherein it is directly addressed to persons of this description. And many historical instances we meet with in the Bible, of those who have been comforted and made happy by its encouraging reasonings, and
gracious

* Mark vi. 30.

gracious promises. From the testimony therefore of Scripture, and the nature of the gospel itself, it may be rationally concluded, it cannot afford true joy to a heart that is not thus prepared to receive it. The degree indeed of affliction necessary to be endured, in order to prepare men for the cheerful reception of divine truth, it may not be easy for us to determine. God however knows: and some he leads on to the enjoyment of religious pleasures in a more gentle and gradual manner than others. But it stands to reason, that the joy the heart feels must bear some proportion to the anxiety it has suffered.

Now, vain, light, enthusiastic persons, are in a great degree strangers to these painful exercises of mind we have been just describing. It is on a sudden, induced by some motive of curiosity, that they hear the word; as suddenly they receive it; and as suddenly they are elevated and transported by it. Their minds, previous to the joy they boast of, are wholly unoccupied with any serious, substantial, sentiments about divine things. Some persons, indeed, who come within the description of the text, may have had general convictions of sin, and alarming apprehensions of the wrath of God. But these painful feelings are desultory and temporary, and capable of being quickly allayed, if not entirely removed, by the stupifying opiate of worldly pleasures. Wherefore a rapturous joy, which suddenly succeeds to a kind of dread that has no ingenuous disposition mingled with it, as well as a joy preceded by no anxiety at all, may be naturally suspected to originate in enthusiasm, rather than religion.—But,

2. Let us enquire *what* it is that *excites* this joy.

The causes of that elevation of the spirits which we commonly call joy are various. Wine and other en-

briating

briating liquors, give a brisk circulation to the blood, and nervous fluids, and so exhilarate and gladden the heart. A sudden impression made on the senses by external objects will have the like effect. The reveries of the imagination, in a dream or delirium, will create a fascinating kind of pleasure. Admiration, wonder, and astonishment, have a great influence to produce it. Yea, the more tender passions of pity and commiseration are accompanied with a degree of complacency and delight. So that joy may owe its existence to the senses, the imagination, and the tumultuous or soothing operation of the other passions; as well as to sound reasoning, and a well-grounded persuasion of real truth, and of our interest in the great blessings of it, which are the only legitimate sources of religious joy.

Now, this observed, it is easy to conceive how a man of the cast our Saviour here speaks of, may be said to receive the word with joy. In some instances, it is the word itself, the mere sound, without any idea affixed to it, that creates joy. The effect is instantly and mechanically produced, by the tone and cadence of the voice, accompanied by an appearance, attitude, and gesture, that happen to please. The man is delighted, elevated, and surprised, and he knows not why. Facts might be mentioned directly in point. Some have been heard to say, at the passing out of an assembly, in words to this effect, "What a heavenly preacher! he spoke like an angel—but I could not understand him." In other instances, it is not the sound only, but the sense that affects. Here; however, it will be found, that the joy the man feels, is purely the effect of his imagination being amused with objects new, great, and marvellous, or with scenes of a soft, tender, moving kind;

kind ; and not of his heart's being relieved of a burden with which it had been oppressed, or his being comforted with the hope of obtaining that spiritual good he had thirsted after ; for he had neither groaned under the burden of sin, nor had he aspired to true holiness.

To exemplify what we mean, we will suppose the preacher to describe the joys of heaven, by striking figures taken from sensible objects. He holds up to view a paradise exquisitely beautiful and enchanting ; the trees, shrubs, and flowers, all perfect in their kind, arranged in the loveliest order, and affording a fragrance most delightful to the smell, and fruits most delicious to the taste ; verdant banks, purling streams, shadow bowers, transporting prospects ; and the joy heightened now, by the soft melody of the grove, then the rapturous symphony of human voices, and then the loud and swelling notes of angelic bands. This, this, he assures the listening multitude is heaven ; here they shall enjoy increasing pleasures, without the least anxiety, pain, or disgust ; and without the most distant apprehension of either interruption or end. Is it to be wondered, that such a scene, painted in the liveliest colours, beheld by a glowing imagination, and realized by unsuspecting credulity, should give ecstatic joy to a carnal heart ? It is not. But is there religion in all this ? Ah ! no.

So likewise, we may easily conceive how a pleasing kind of sensation, excited in the breast by a pathetic description of misery, particularly the sufferings of Christ, may be mistaken for religion. Many a one has heard this sad tale told, and instantly concluded from his feelings, which partook partly of pain and pleasure, that he loved Christ. The sensation, in these in-

stances, is precisely the same with that which a tender spectator feels, at a tragical exhibition in the theatre. And if I might be allowed to relate a little story I have somewhere met with, it would both illustrate and confirm what has been asserted. One of a compassionate disposition, but grossly ignorant, (perhaps an Indian), hearing for the first time, in a Christian assembly, a striking description of our Saviour's last passion, melted into tears; and after the service was over, eagerly besought the preacher to be ingenuous with him, and tell him whether the fact he had related was true, for he hoped in God, that such a cruel deed could never have been perpetrated.

But to bring the matter still nearer. We will suppose what is said to be divested of all *imagery*, and that men are told in plain words, that Jesus Christ came to procure for them the pardon of their sins, salvation from the miseries of hell, and a right to future and eternal happiness: I see no reason why a general apprehension of these truths, and a general assent to them, may not excite some pleasure, yea, even joy in their breasts, without their hearts being made a whit the better. Can any one, whose conscience tells him he has sinned, who feels remorse for it, and dreads the tremendous consequence of dying under the curse of Almighty God; can, I say, such person avoid being anxious? And if so, can he do otherwise than rejoice, when he apprehends, though the ground of the apprehension may be a mistaken one, that God has forgiven him?

What dread has the conscience of many an ignorant bigotted Papist felt, from a conviction of his having sinned! And how happy has he instantly felt himself, upon his having confessed to the priest, and received
 absolution;

absolution; while alas, he has remained as wicked as ever! In this case, truth is mixed with error, and the false joy he feels, arises out of this corrupt mixture. He believes God is disposed to pardon sin, for the sake of Christ. So, agreeable to the language of the text, he may be said to receive the word with joy. But then it is his mistaken notion about confession, and the power of the priest to absolve him, thus mingled with his general assent to the Christian doctrine, that has the main influence to excite that pleasing sensation he feels and boasts of. And the case is much the same with many Protestants as well as Papists. The man's conscience reproaches him for certain crimes, and he feels himself wretched. He is told God is merciful, and will forgive men their sins for Christ's sake. The news give him joy, for he flatters himself he shall escape the punishment he dreaded. But his joy is without foundation, for he has no just idea of the evil of sin itself, no ingenuous sorrow for it, and no sincere desire to be delivered from it.

In like manner, we may easily conceive how a man of this character may be amused, entertained, and even transported with a hope of heaven. He is told, and very truly too, that in heaven there is a perfect freedom from all pain and sorrow, and an uninterrupted enjoyment of the most exquisite delights. These tidings he receives with joy. But the moment he is told, that this freedom from pain is accompanied with a freedom from sin, and that these positive pleasures result from communion with a holy God, and a participation of his purity and rectitude; the moment, I say, he is told this, his joy abates, languishes, and dies.—But I forbear. What has been said may suffice to enable us
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to distinguish on the important question, what it is that excites our joy!—We are next to consider,

3. What are *the effects* of it?

The joy a real Christian feels, is sober, rational, well-grounded, and will admit of the most pleasing reflections—He possesses himself: He can calmly reason upon the state of his mind, and those great truths and objects, the contemplation of which makes him happy; and he can recollect the pleasures he has enjoyed on some special occasions, with composure and satisfaction.—It humbles him. The higher he ascends the mount of communion with God, the less he appears in his own eyes. Those beams of the sun of righteousness which gladden his heart, throw a light upon his follies and sins. With Job, “he abhors himself, and repents in dust and ashes*.” And, as the apostle expresses it, “thinks soberly of himself as he ought to think †.”—His joy inspires him with meekness, candour, and benevolence. It allays, if not entirely extinguishes, the rage of violent passion, fans the flame of fervent charity, and puts the soul into a temper, to unite cordially with all good men, to pity the bad, and to forgive its bitterest enemies.—His joy, in a word, makes him watchful and holy. He rejoices with trembling, is upon his guard against every thing that may disturb the tranquillity of his mind, holds sin at a distance as his greatest enemy, and aspires with growing ardour to the likeness of the ever-blessed God.

On the contrary, who that contemplates the character of the credulous, self-deceived enthusiast, but must see what has been said of the real Christian, awfully reversed in his temper and conduct? Is he sober, prudent, and self-collected? Ah! no. He is little better

* Job xlii. 6.

† Rom. xii. 3.

better than a madman, or one *drunk with wine wherein is excess*. His heaven is a fool's paradise, and his account of it as unintelligible as the frantic talk of one in a delirium. Is he humble? Far from it. The pride of religious frenzy swells him into importance. Imagining himself a favourite of Heaven, he looks down upon his fellow-mortals with an air of indifference, if not contempt—"Stand at a distance, I am holier than thou." Is he meek, candid, and benevolent? So much the reverse, that the very names of these virtues sound harshly in his ear, and stand for little else, in his opinion, than pusillanimity, formality, and hypocrisy. Is he conscientious and circumspect in his deportment? No. Boasting of his freedom, he can take liberties that border on immorality, and treat the scruples of a weak believer as indicating a legal spirit. Superior to the drudgery of duties, he walks at large, in no danger of being thrown into suspense about his state towards God, by what he calls human frailties; and not doubting but that his zeal, which, like the Persian scythes, mows down, without mercy, all before him, will open his way to a triumphant crown in heaven.

Now all these things considered—*what precedes*—*what excites*—and *what follows* the joy our Saviour here speaks of, we shall be at no loss to distinguish clearly between the joy of an enthusiast and that of a real Christian. To proceed.

Having thus received the word with joy, he professes himself a Christian. And thus much must be said in his favour, that being sure he is right, he is not ashamed of his faith. This ingenuity and frankness of temper, secures him from all imputation of hypocrisy, and induces his friends to hope, that, with all his frailties,

frailties, he may possibly be a good man. So he is admitted to the participation of divine ordinances, is enrolled among the number of professing Christians, and for a while, allowing for the extravagancies of intemperate zeal, behaves himself in a manner not to be materially censured. But—what is the event? Sad to say!—*Apostasy*. But the consideration of this, with what follows, we shall refer to the next sermon.

In the mean while, let me beseech those who answer to the character we have been describing, to consider seriously their state towards God. Consideration is, I am sensible, what you, Sirs, are not accustomed to; but in a matter of such consequence as this, I would hope you will, at least for this once, yield to our request. Let me ask you then, Can you sincerely believe that a religion, which consists wholly in a rapturous elevation of the passions, independent of the clear dictates of the judgment, and the governing dispositions of the heart, can be acceptable to God? Surely if there be such a thing as religion, it must originate in the understanding and conscience, and so diffuse its influence over the passions. It must consist in an affectionate regard to the divine authority, springing from a clear idea of the difference between good and evil, and an ardent desire to escape the latter and enjoy the former. And Oh! how deplorable will your condition be, should you in the great day of account, after all your flaming pretensions to religion, be found utterly destitute of it!

Nothing has, I hope, dropped in the course of this sermon, which may convey an idea to any mind unfavourable to religion, as if it had no concern with the passions, and were not adapted to afford joy to the heart. It is indeed most interesting to the passions,
and

and has been found, by the experience of the wisest and best of men, to be the pleasanter thing in the whole world. Let a man speculate as long as he will upon the great truths of religion, if he does not feel them, if they neither warm his heart, nor influence his life, what is he the better? Neither his profound knowledge, nor the contempt in which he holds those of the opposite character for their ignorance and credulity, will do him any real good. The apostle Paul, with all his accurate and superior understanding of the great things of God, was a warm, lively, passionate Christian. He knew what it was to be transported on occasions almost beyond himself. "Whether," says he to the Corinthians, "we be besides ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. For the love of Christ constraineth us*." May we be such Christians as he was!

To conclude. What has been said will, I hope, have an effect to relieve the humble but afflicted Christian, of some uncomfortable doubts with which he may have been oppressed, respecting his state towards God. You, my friends, who are of a timorous make, and through various causes of a sorrowful spirit, are strangers to the rapturous feelings of which these confident people we have been describing, so much boast. But it does not from thence follow, that you are utterly unacquainted with the pleasures of religion, and that your hearts are not right towards God. You have seen the difference between good and evil; you have deeply lamented your sins, and hungered and thirsted after righteousness; you have cordially approved of that method of salvation divine grace has appointed, and have entrusted your immortal all to the
hands

* 2 Cor. v. 13, 14.

hands of Christ. Why then should you fear? Be of good courage. The blessed Jesus is your friend, and he will keep what you have committed to him against the great day.

PART II.

THE character of ENTHUSIASTIC hearers is now under consideration. Their temper and conduct are described with remarkable clearness and precision in the text*. “Some seeds fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth. And when the sun was up, they were scorched, and because they had not root, they withered away.” Our Saviour’s exposition of this part of the parable runs thus †: “He that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it: yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth, because of the word, by and bye he is offended.” Now here we have proposed to consider—the character of these persons previous to their hearing the word—the effect it instantly produces on their minds—their failure afterwards—and the causes of it. The two first of these enquiries were the subjects of the preceding sermon, and we go on now,

III. To consider the lamentable *Apostasy* of these deluded men.

The seed that fell upon stony places, and forthwith sprung up, in a little time “withered away.” It did not rise into the stalk and ear, and so bear fruit; but the verdure passed off almost as soon as it was beheld,
and

* Mat. xiii. 5, 6.

† Ver. 20, 21.

and the seed itself totally perished *. This our Lord explains of the unhappy man's "enduring for a while, and then being offended;" or, as Luke has it †, his "believing for a while, and then falling away." Here two things will deserve our notice—the *term* of his profession—and the *manner* in which it is *renounced*.

I. The *term* of his profession is short.

Between the sowing of seed in the decline of the year, and the reaping at the following harvest, there is a considerable intervening space: but the seed the text speaks of springs up and is gone in a few days or weeks. So here. It is by degrees, and for a course of years, the genuine Christian is advancing towards perfection. But alas! the poor, vain, unprincipled professor, is instantly at the zenith of all his glory. Some, indeed, hold it out longer than others: and the reason may be, because nothing remarkable arises from without to try their constancy, and to bring forward their real characters to view. But, for the most part, a short course of time shews what are men's principles and motives of conduct. Enthusiastic zeal, like inflammable air, quickly evaporates. The sources of that pleasure which gives existence to a spurious religion, and an equivocal devotion, are soon exhausted. The imagination tires, the senses are palled, and the passions, for want of novelty and variety to keep them alive, sink away into a languid, unfeeling, torpid state. Or if the man is still the same restless being he ever was, some new object catches his attention, and puts an end to his former connections and

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pursuits.

* -----Primis segetes moriuntur in herbis:

Et modo sol nimius, nimius modo corripit imber.

OVID.

pursuits. "His goodness, as the morning cloud, and the early dew, passeth away *." Like a flaming meteor, having a while drawn the attention of all around him, he disappears, and vanishes into eternal oblivion. Of him we may say, in the language of the psalmist, "How is he brought into desolation as in a moment! as a dream when one awaketh, so, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise his image †."—But, to be a little more particular,

2. In what *manner* does he *renounce* his profession?

He either silently quits it, or publicly disavows it. He is *offended*, stumbles, *falls*, falls *away*. He no longer maintains and defends the truth, no longer frequents the house of God, no longer associates with his fellow Christians, no longer pays any attention to the duties of the family or the closet, if indeed he ever regarded them at all. The name by which he was called is obliterated, the place that knew him knows him no more, his religious connections are dissolved, from the view of those with whom he had joined in Christian fellowship he withdraws, and bidding adieu to all that is serious and good, he mingles with the world, enters into their spirit and views, and in the general crowd of vain unthinking men, is forgotten and lost.

Or else, which is sometimes the case, he as openly and contumeliously casts off his profession, as he had hastily and passionately assumed it. The faith he once swore to defend with the last drop of his blood, he now laughs at as an old wife's fable. The people with whom he had associated, he stigmatizes with the name of fools or impostors, the institutions of religion he treats with sovereign contempt, the reins he throws

on

* Hof. vi. 4.

† Psa. lxxiii. 19, 20.

on the neck of his brutal appetites, "treads under foot the Son of God, counts the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and does despite to the Spirit of grace*." He falls, and falls away so as not to be recovered again. For "sinning thus wilfully after he had received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking-for of judgment, and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries †."

How lamentable a case this! What pious heart can think of it, without feeling for the honour of religion, and trembling for the wretched apostate! Ah foolish, unhappy, disingenuous man! Is this the result of all thy boasted joys, thy flaming zeal, thy confident vows, thy solemn professions? Thou didst run well, in thine own apprehension, and that of multitudes about thee; what hath hindered? Who hath bewitched thee, that thou shouldst renounce the truth, after having had Jesus Christ evidently set forth crucified before thine eyes? Would to God, that our remonstrances, expostulations, and entreaties, might even yet make some impression on thy heart! But if that is past feeling, let however thy baseness and perfidy secure the sentence of divine justice for ever, from the charge of severity.—It remains that we now consider,

IV. The cause of these men's apostasy.

This our Saviour explains with admirable precision, by teaching us that it is partly owing to the want of something *within*, essentially important to religion, and partly to a concurrence of circumstances from *without* unfavourable to the profession of it.

1. Something is wanting *within*.

The

* Heb. x. 29.

† Heb. z. 26, 27.

The parable says, "The seed forthwith sprung up, because it had no deepness of earth;" "and it withered away, because it had no root," as Mark has it *; "and lacked moisture," as it is expressed in Luke †. For want of a sufficient quantity of earth the seed did not sink deep enough into the ground, and through the luxuriance of the mould it too quickly disseminated and sprung up. So that having taken root, there was no source whence the tender grass might be supplied with nourishment; and of consequence it must necessarily in a little time wither and die. Agreeably therefore to the figure, our Lord, in his explanation of the parable, speaks of these hearers as "having no root in themselves."

And such precisely is the case of the sort of professors we are discoursing of. They have no principle of religion in their hearts. Their notions are not properly digested, they do not disseminate themselves in the mind, take fast hold on the conscience, and incorporate, if I may so express myself, with the practical powers of the soul. "The word preached does not profit them, not being mixed with faith;" or, as perhaps it might be rendered, because they are not united by faith to the word ‡. They hear the word, affix some general idea to it, admit it all to be true, without either consideration or reflection, feel a confused tumultuous agitation of the passions, and so are instantly precipitated into action. But their understanding is not duly enlightened, their judgment is not rightly informed, their conscience is not thoroughly awakened, their will not subdued, nor their affections sanctified. In short, their religion is little else than an airy phantom, a wild reverie, an idle passing dream. Now this

* Chap. iv. 6.

† Chap. viii. 6.

‡ Heb. iv. 2.

this being the case, is it to be wondered that in a very little time they fall away?—But this sad event is owing likewise,

2. To a concurrence of circumstances from *without* unfavourable to the profession of religion. These, in the parable, are all comprehended under the idea of *the sun's scorching* the springing grass; and, in our Saviour's exposition of it, are described by the terms *tribulation, persecution, affliction, and temptation*, all which *arise because of the word*, or are occasioned by it.

In the early age of Christianity, it was scarce possible for a man to profess the religion of Jesus, without exposing himself thereby to great temporal inconvenience and distress. Of this our Saviour frequently warned his disciples, telling them, that if they would follow him, they must be content, for his sake, to part with houses, lands, goods, wives, children, and their dearest enjoyments; yea, that they must be willing to suffer reproach, imprisonment, and death. And what he foretold came to pass. “Through much tribulation they entered into the kingdom of God*.” And this tribulation arose *because of the word*. The doctrine of the cross was to the Jews a stumbling-block; and to the Greeks foolishness; its simplicity and purity created an aversion to it, which nothing short of a divine power could subdue. So that the implacable resentments of the former urged them to every possible exertion, in order to extirpate the Christian name; and, the insufferable pride of the latter, begat in their breasts a sovereign contempt for all who assumed it. Wherefore, the professors of this new religion, as it was called, were sure to meet with more or less oblo-

quy and persecution. And such treatment, not failing to bring their sincerity and constancy to the test, soon produced a revolution in those, whose profession had nothing to support it, but a mere passion for novelty. Their confessions and vows, fair and promising as they might seem, quickly withered beneath the scorching beams of persecution.

The like event hath happened in regard of an infinite number of pretended Christians since those times. And few, even of those whose enthusiasm has risen to the highest pitch, have had firmness enough, merely for the sake of acquiring a splendid name, to renounce all that was dear to them in this world. But the profession of the gospel now flourishes under the mild auspices of liberty, and men may avow their religious principles, not only without danger of being called to account by the magistrate, but with little hazard of suffering any material reproach and abuse from their neighbours. Yet, fashionable as it may be, in some periods and countries, to assume the appearance of religion, it is still true, that he who will live godly in Christ Jesus, must suffer persecution. A firm attachment to the simplicity of divine truth, and a conscientious observance of its precepts, will, especially under certain circumstances, expose a man to the ill-natured censures of some, and the cold shy indifference of others.

Now, whatever the affliction or temptation may be, which arises because of the word, the mere nominal professor, who has not ballast enough in himself to keep him steady, will be quickly overpowered, sunk, and destroyed. Instances of this sort, are too numerous to be particularly recited. How often has the sneer of a profane acquaintance, a trifling affront from

a fellow-Christian, or a sudden resistance to a mere fancy or humour, become the occasion of a man's rending himself from his religious connections, and, in the end, totally renouncing his profession! Puffed up with pride and conceit, and unprincipled by the grace of God, he stumbles at every stone or pivot he meets, till at length he falls, and falls to rise no more again. And if little offences shall produce this effect, it is not to be thought strange, that the mighty storms of adversity, arising now from this, and then from that quarter, should dash to pieces the shallow bark of an empty profession, on the rock of infidelity; or that the brisk gales of prosperity should sink in the quicksands of worldly dissipation and pleasure.

Examples of such miserable apostates, there are many: We will instance only a few during our Saviour's personal ministry here on earth, and a little after his ascension into heaven. There was an occasion on which he benevolently fed five thousand people, with a few barley loaves and fishes. The splendour of this miracle so sensibly struck the passions of the multitude, that, in an ecstasy of admiration and wonder, they cried out, "This surely is the Messiah, the prophet that should come. Let us take him by force and make him a king." Thus instantly and loudly do they profess their faith in Christ; nor would they have hesitated a moment, to pronounce the severest censure upon any one of their number, who should have dissented from the proposal. But no moral change having passed on their hearts, what is the result? The next temptation that arises, shakes their faith in Christ, dissolves their attachment to him, and puts an end to their profession. On the morrow, piqued at our Lord's freedom in reproving them for their worldliness, and
offended

offended at the purity and sublimity of his doctrine; they murmur at him, complain of his sayings as hard and unintelligible, deny that he came down from heaven, and, in a word, go back and walk no more with him*.

Of the same character were the men of Nazareth. When our Lord entered their synagogue, and discoursed to them upon a passage from the Old Testament; they fastened their eyes upon him, bore witness to what he said; and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. They were all attention, and seemed deeply affected with his mild and persuasive reasoning. But alas! the scene is soon changed. They urge him to work a miracle among them. He refuses to gratify their curiosity, representing to them their real character, which was like that of their perverse and iniquitous ancestors. Upon which, filled with wrath, they seize him, lead him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, and would have cast him headlong from thence, had he not passed through the midst of them and so escaped †.

No less extraordinary was the wretched enthusiasm of the people at Jerusalem ‡. One day we see them leading our Saviour in triumph into the city, crying, "Hosanna to the Son of David, blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!" and the next, at the persuasion of the chief priests and elders, with unexampled cruelty, demanding of Pilate his crucifixion. Who could have supposed a change so marvellous, should take place in so short a time? The truth is, the real character of the people was the same the one day as the other; but objects striking their imagination

* John vi. † Luke iv. 16.—30. ‡ Mat. xxi. 1.—11.

tion now, differently from what they did then, these very extraordinary effects ensued.

In fine, the Laodiceans, at least many of them, were notoriously of the character we have been describing. It is not to be doubted, when the gospel was first preached among them, they received it with joy. The ground was stony, but having a little earth upon it, the seed met with a favourable reception. It forthwith sprung up, and produced a verdure pleasing to the eye, and likely to be followed with a fair harvest. But alas! having no root, and the sun of worldly prosperity arising upon it, it quickly withered. It is easy to imagine the rapturous pleasure these people felt, at the first hearing of this new and marvellous doctrine; and probably for a time it continued, and they brought forth some fruits answerable to it. But it was not long ere they relapsed into their former state. Their hearts not being established with grace, and the world with its flattering pleasures wantonly caressing them; their joy declined, their zeal abated, and they became neither cold nor hot. What a strange reverse! How is the gold become dim, and the fine gold changed! "Thou sayest," such is the language of him who searched their hearts, "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not, that thou art wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked*."

Nor are characters of this description confined to the first age of Christianity; they have existed in every age and place, where the gospel has been preached since that time; in Romish and reformed churches, in this and other countries, in the establishment and among dissenters. Indeed enthusiasm is not to be considered

as the offspring of religion, or as peculiar to the religious of any denomination. It is the result of a particular cast of mind, or temperature of animal spirits; and to be met with among men of all professions of life. Nor is it, when held under reasonable restraints, without its use to society. The excessive ardour, for instance, of a brave general, has, on certain occasions, produced efforts, which, though scarcely reconcileable with military skill, have been followed with the most beneficial consequences. And if Christians, whose religion holds up to their view, the grandest objects and the most animating prospects, are sometimes transported almost beyond themselves; it ought not to be thought strange: nor will any evil accrue from it, but on the contrary, much good, both to themselves and others. But when one of an unprincipled heart assumes, under the influence of a heated imagination, the character of a man of religion; every wild and dangerous extravagance is to be apprehended, nor can there remain a doubt, that the event of his profession will be such as has been represented. Religion, however, is not to be blamed for these evils, of which it is no way the cause, though it may be the occasion; they are to be set down to the account of a fatal, but too frequent combination of a depraved heart, with an impetuous natural temper.

Thus have we considered our Saviour's striking description of the second class of hearers, namely, the ENTHUSIASTIC--their character previous to their hearing the word--the effect it instantly produces on their minds--their apostasy--and the causes of it. It remains that we now make a few reflections.

1. What a striking picture has our Saviour here given us of human nature!

The character of enthusiastic hearers is drawn in our text to the life, with the greatest simplicity, and free from all art or colouring; and it has been realized, as was just observed, in instances without number. Every age and country where the gospel has been preached, have furnished examples of persons who have treated it in the manner here described. And how natural to conclude from hence, that Jesus of Nazareth was a teacher that came from God! He taught with authority, not as the scribes. He had an exact and comprehensive knowledge of all men, and of all things. "He needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man*." How devoutly should we revere his infinite wisdom and penetration! how diligently listen to his instructions! and how implicitly confide in his word and promises! And since he has thus exactly foretold what treatment his gospel would meet with in the world, how should this consideration fortify the minds of his faithful ministers, amidst all the discouragements they meet with from this quarter! Be it so that enthusiasm, as well as infidelity, erects its standard against the gospel wherever it comes, our divine Master has told us that so it would be; we have therefore no reason to be unduly cast down at an appearance so sad and unpleasing.

2. Of what importance is it to study ourselves, and to keep a guard upon our passions!

Men differ, as we have seen, from one another in regard of their animal frame, as well as their moral disposition; and the former has no small influence, though not in so great a degree as the latter, on their speculations and feelings about matters of religion.

To

* John ii. 25.

To know therefore what is our natural cast, what the temperature of our animal spirits, how we are apt to be affected with external objects, whether we are lively or phlegmatic, gay or gloomy, cheerful or severe; to know this, I say, is a matter of great consequence. For hereby we shall be secured from mistaking our own proper character, and pronouncing too hastily either for or against ourselves. Some truly pious Christians have been apt to conclude from those painful feelings, which are the mere effect of natural constitution, that they are utter strangers to the grace of God; while others, on the mere ground of their lively and elevated feelings, have as confidently insisted that they are Christians, and Christians too of a superior rank. In the former case, the mistake is not a little prejudicial to a man's present comfort; in the latter, it is essentially dangerous to his everlasting interest.

Let us therefore study ourselves. It is manly to wish to know what our real character is. Self-knowledge will have an important influence on our general conduct. It will prevent many solecisms in our daily deportment, both as men and Christians. It will put us upon our guard against the arts of designing infidels, and the miserable delusions of enthusiasm. And it will assist us in our attention to those duties, which are wisely and graciously appointed for our furtherance in the divine life.

3. We see what kind of preaching is to be coveted, and what avoided.

Improvement in substantial knowledge and real holiness, will be the grand object with every wise man: to this he will readily sacrifice imagination and passion. These indeed are not to be treated with neglect.

glect. A dull, heavy, lifeless discourse, whatever useful instruction it may contain, will have little effect. A man who wishes to persuade ought no doubt to feel his subject, and religious subjects are of all others the most sublime and animating. But if all the preacher's aim is to amuse the fancy of his audience, without informing their judgment, and to rouse their passions, without getting at their hearts, little good is to be expected from his most ingenuous essays, or his most strenuous exertions.

Religion is a serious thing, and so miserably ignorant and perverse are the generality of hearers, that they need be closely reasoned, and faithfully dealt with upon this most important matter. What prospect is there then of a sinner's being converted to God by rhetorical flourishes, well-turned periods, or an artful laboured display of splendid abilities! And how much less prospect of his becoming either wise or good by the violent impulse of loud vociferation, unmeaning tones, and frantic gestures! Will the exciting an ignorant hearer's wonder by a few empty jejune criticisms, convince him of the evil of sin, and his danger of suffering the wrath of Almighty God? Will the playing upon his imagination with a plenty of ill-managed tropes and figures, and a succession of idle trifling stories, persuade him to break off his vices, and become a sound substantial Christian? Will the grimace of a distorted countenance, the thunder of an unnaturally elevated voice, or the terror of uplifted hands, compel him to rank among the followers of the Lamb? Ah! no. Effects indeed, and very important ones, have been produced by these expedients; but alas! they are such as have rather injured than

served the real interests of mankind. This has sufficiently appeared from the preceding discourse.

Let us, therefore, if we would rightly understand the word of the kingdom, and be savingly benefited by it, choose those for our instructors who clearly state it, ably defend it, and with all the seriousness, affection, and earnestness, which its infinite importance demands, address our hearts and consciences upon it. It is not wild enthusiasm, but a divine faith, that must bring us to heaven.

4. Our Lord, by the instruction given us in our text, has enabled us to reply to an objection often urged against the doctrine of the saints final perseverance.

We are frequently reminded of persons whose profession for a time was fair and splendid, but who in the end renounced it. And no doubt this has been the fact in too many sad instances. But what does it prove? No more than that these men were either designing hypocrites, or else hastily took upon them a profession of what they did not rightly understand, truly believe, and cordially approve. And will any one say that the event of such a profession is at all to be wondered at? or that it does in the least clash with the assurances our Saviour has given us, of his attention to the final interests of his faithful people? It might naturally be expected that the man who received the word in the manner the text describes, should by and by be offended. No real change had ever passed on his heart, no living principle of religion was ever implanted in his breast, and no promise was ever given him of such support and assistance, as should secure him from apostasy in the hour of temptation and danger.

But

But where the understanding has been duly enlightened, and the heart really impregnated with a principle of religion, as it is not likely that what is in a manner interwoven with a man's nature should be easily parted with; so likewise the Scriptures assure us, that divine grace will watch over it, defend, cherish, and bring it to perfection. The former idea is authorised by our Lord's commendation of "the water of life," in his discourse with the woman of Samaria: it shall be, says he, in him to whom I give it, "a well of water springing up into everlasting life*." And the latter idea, I mean the attention which the blessed God pays to this vital principle of religion in the hearts of his people, is strikingly expressed by our Saviour in those remarkable words †: "I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand: and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand." —Once more,

5. And lastly, Let not the mournful subject we have been considering, create any discouragement in the breast of the truly humble but weak Christian.

It methinks I hear him, in the sadness of his heart, say, "I have received the word, and, as I thought, with joy. But what if my joy should prove a mere illusion of the fancy? And what if my profession should issue in apostasy?" This, be assured, Christian, and I think I speak upon the authority of Scripture, will not be the case. Recollect what has been said respecting the temper of your mind previous to the comfort you enjoyed, the considerations that excited it, and the effects it produced.

You was in earnest about the salvation of your soul.

* John iv. 14.

† John x. 28, 29.

You clearly saw you had offended God, and lost his image; that you were in danger of suffering his wrath, and that there was no help in you. What relieved you of your fear was a firm persuasion, upon the testimony of Scripture, that God is merciful, for Christ's sake, to the chiefest of sinners. On the merit of this divine Saviour you wholly reposed yourself for pardon, justification, and eternal life. So you was humbled before God, under a sense of your own vileness; you regretted the offences you had committed against him; you felt your obligations to his mercy; you resolved upon taking the proper measures for mortifying your lusts, and resisting temptation; and though you have not yet attained, nor are yet perfect, it is however your daily concern to avoid sin, and to please God.

And now, I ask, is there not a clear distinction between your character, and the characters of the self-deceiving hypocrite, and the wild enthusiast? Why then should you be thus cast down? Put your trust in God. Go on, diligently hearing the word of the kingdom, comforting yourself with its many gracious promises, cherishing in your breast its divine temper, and practising its sacred precepts. So you may rest assured the event will be to your infinite joy. "God is faithful who has promised."

DISCOURSE IV.

THE CHARACTER OF WORLDLY-MINDED HEARERS CONSIDERED.

MAT. xiii. 7.

*And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung
up and choaked them.*

THE characters of the two first classes of hearers having been considered, we proceed now to that of the

THIRD, The WORLDLY-MINDED. These are described in our text. "Some seeds fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up and choaked them."

The soil in the hedge or inclosure, round about the field, is usually richer and deeper, and so more favourable for cultivation, than the ground on the way-side, or in stony places. Wherefore the seed which accidentally falls here will be likely after a time, to take root: nor is it liable to be trod on, or instantly scorched with heat. But then, unhappily the thorns, which, through the luxuriance of the soil, grow here in abundance, spring up with it, and crowding about it, keep off the sun and the air: so its growth is checked, and of consequence, it brings no fruit to perfection, but in a course of time, it is choaked and destroyed.

Such is the figure our Lord adopts, to describe the effects which the word produces on their minds, who, amidst all their pretensions to religion, are yet men of the world, and bring not forth such fruit as might reasonably be expected from their profession. His exposition of this part of the parable you have in the twenty-second verse: "He also that receiveth seed among the thorns, is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choak the word, and he becometh unfruitful."—Here you will observe,

1. The treatment the word meets with from these persons.—They *bear* it, and *receive* it.

These terms have been already explained, and are here to be understood, as in the former case, of affixing some idea to the gospel, giving a general assent to its truth, and professing it. But some difference is to be remarked, even in regard of these particulars, between the sort of persons considered in the former discourse, and those we are now treating of. The enthusiast, if not literally speaking under the influence of mere sound, yet hears with such an eager, rapid kind of levity, that his notions of religion are a perfect chaos of wild ideas without either order or consistency. The transition, too, he makes from his first hearing the word to his believing and professing it, is almost instantaneous; and in the whole business, he appears to be deeply interested in what he is about. But the case is perhaps otherwise here. The man hears, and goes on to hear, till at length he collects a tolerably consistent notion of the gospel. But though, like the other, he admits it all to be true, without feeling himself embarrassed with doubts; yet he discovers little of that zeal, which so strongly marks the character of the enthusiast.

After

After a while, however, he makes a public profession; and this done in the ordinary way, and without any shew or parade, he is considered as a sober, sedate Christian. - Yea, more than this, having professed the word, he brings forth some fruit; for this is evidently implied in the phrase used by Luke *, of his "bringing no fruit to perfection." His conduct is in the general decent and respectable.—Now, this being the manner of his receiving the word, you will observe,

2. How its salutary operation on his heart is obstructed and defeated.—He *goes forth*, says Luke †, that is, mingles with the world, becomes more intimately connected with the businesses and amusements of life than he has occasion, and so by degrees, is conformed to the spirit, manners, and conduct of the vain part of mankind ‡. "The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things ||," or, "the pleasures of life," as Luke has it §, "enter in," that is, into his heart. They seize his attention, exercise his thoughts, take up his time, and engross his affections.—And what,

3. Is the event?—These thorns *choak the word*.

Its natural and proper operation on his judgment, conscience and passions is obstructed; and, after a time, the impressions it had made are wholly effaced, and the
very

* Chap. viii. 14.

† Ibid.

‡ Perhaps *πορευόμενοι* may be intended to convey an idea of continued action, as in our Lord's words to the apostles, Matt. x. 7. *πορευόμενοι κηρύσσετε*, as ye go, preach. And in that case, a very important circumstance in the conduct of these hearers, is held up to view, namely, their going on in a constant round of hearing the word, and pursuing the world.

|| Mark iv. 19.

§ Chap. viii. 14.

very remembrance of it lost. So he *becomes unfruitful*. None of the amiable graces of humility, meekness, temperance, simplicity, and benevolence, adorn his profession. He is not, indeed, as yet, strictly speaking, an apostate, but maintains a general character for sobriety, justice, and decency. It is nevertheless true of him, that he *brings no fruit to perfection*. There is fruit, but it scarce deserves the name of fruit, not having arrived at its proper growth, ripened kindly, or got its true flavour. The duties of piety and devotion, are reluctantly, irregularly, and carelessly performed; those of Christian-friendship and love, are little attended to; and those of mortification and self-denial, are almost wholly overlooked and forgotten. And what is the final issue? He is *himself* choaked as well as the word, (for so Luke describes it *,) with cares, riches, and the pleasures of this life. He dies, perishes, is lost for ever.

Thus you have a general comment upon this part of the parable, and upon our Saviour's exposition of it. And now, it will be necessary to consider more particularly,

I. What those things are, which prevent the salutary effect of God's word upon that class of hearers we are here discoursing of;

II. How they operate to that end; and,

III. The sad event of all.

I. Let us consider what those things are, which obstruct the due operation of God's word on the hearts of these men. Our Lord mentions three—*cares—riches—pleasures*.

FIRST, *The cares of the world*.

By *the cares of the world*, he means undue and criminal

iminal anxieties about secular concerns. Now, as it is allowed on all hands, that worldly cares are not to be wholly reprobated; in order to our clearly shewing how far they are, or are not sinful, we will consider them in reference to a threefold view of a man's temporal interests—*subsistence—competence—affluence*.

By *subsistence*, we mean the necessaries of life, what a man cannot do without, such as food, raiment, and habitation. To wish for these, to take proper measures to obtain them, and when we have them to enjoy them, cannot be wrong. "Your Father," says our Saviour, "knoweth that ye have need of these things*." Indifference to them, if that were possible, would be criminal, and of consequence, the not using proper endeavours to procure them, would be criminal also. No pretence of abstractedness from the world, and elevation of heart to heaven, will justify indolence. But then, on the contrary, such a care about even the necessaries of life, as involves in it distrust of the providence of God, and drives a man almost to distraction; such a care, as occupies all his thoughts and time, and renders him incompetent to the duties of religion; and such a care, which is worse, as precipitates him, through indulgence and sloth, into dishonest measures to obtain a livelihood, is very sinful and deplorable indeed. This must strike every one at first view, and therefore requires no further illustration here, in order to prove it, which is all our object at present.

Competence is a relative term, and has respect to capacity and desire. Such a proportion of the world, as is suited to our capacity, that is, to our character and station in life, is a real competence; but such as is suited to desires not regulated by reason and religion,

is

* Luke xii. 30.

is an equivocal competence. As to the latter, all care about it is criminal. But as to the former, a real competence, we do not sin when we wish to possess it. We are only wishing for so much property as the habits of life, acquired by education and the rank we hold in society, do in a sense make necessary; and surely that cannot be wrong. A prince requires more for his support than a subject, and a man in a middling station than a peasant. Desires, cares, and exertions, therefore, directed to this object, are not only allowable, but commendable. But, even though the object may be right, our care about it may exceed; which is the case, when it so entangles our minds, oppresses our spirits, and engrosses our time, as to make us unhappy, and unfit us for the duties we owe to God and our fellow-creatures. In this case, we are no doubt to be blamed, and ought to use our utmost endeavours to correct so threatening an evil.—Once more,

Affluence, or such an abundance of the world as goes beyond subsistence and competence, is also a desirable good. Wherefore the taking prudent, honest, and temperate measures to acquire wealth, to the end our lives may be rendered more comfortable, and we may have it in our power to minister to the necessities of others, is not to be censured. But if our object is, the gratifying our pride and other vain, frivolous passions, our painful labours, however they may assume the specious character of prudent industry, must needs be offensive to God, and injurious to our best interests.

If men will at all events be rich, not regarding the will of providence, or reflecting that riches are often an occasion of great folly and sin; if they will set their hearts on the world, and put out all their strength in pursuit

pursuit of it, losing sight of God, their souls, and a future state; the cares and anxieties that follow, will bring a tremendous load of guilt upon their consciences, pierce them through with many sorrows, and, like thorns and briers, stifle in their breasts every worthy, generous, and religious sentiment.—So much, then, may suffice for explaining what is meant by *the cares of the world*, and to shew how far they are, or are not sinful. Their operation to obstruct the progress of religion in the heart, will come to be considered hereafter. We go on now,

SECONDLY, To *the deceitfulness of riches*, the next thing our Saviour mentions.

His meaning is, that men are prone to reason mistakenly about riches; and the mode of speech he adopts, more strongly and elegantly marks the idea, than if he had so expressed himself*. Riches are, in a sense, themselves deceitful. They assume an appearance different from their real nature and use, and so, the unwary observer is miserably imposed upon. Our business then, will be to consider the false reasonings of a depraved heart in reference to—*wealth itself—the mode of acquiring it—and the term of enjoying it.*

I. As to *wealth itself*, men reason very mistakenly about it.

To treat riches with absolute contempt, as some affect to do, is against all sense and reason. They are the gift of God, and when applied to their proper use are a great blessing. They will procure the necessaries and accommodations of life, and enable us, if we have hearts, to do a great deal of good. But alas! so besotted are mankind, they suppose wealth hath an intrinsic excellence in it which it really hath not. A
diamond,

* Απατη τῶ πλεονεξίας.

diamond, it is true, is more precious than a pebble, and gold than a clod of earth. But compare either of them with true wisdom, and the exalted pleasures of religion, and how mean and trifling do they appear!

The value of riches is chiefly to be estimated by their use. But even here men greatly mistake it. Money will purchase a man delicate food, gorgeous apparel, stately mansions, splendid furniture, power, and some kind of respect from his fellow-creatures. But will it set him beyond the reach of sickness, pain, disappointment, vexation, and contempt? Or if he escapes these evils, can his wealth give him peace of mind, and fully satisfy the large desires of his heart? Will it make him completely and substantially happy? No. It is evident from the nature of the thing, and from the united testimony of all, sooner or later, that it will not. And yet so foolish, so mad are the generality of mankind, that they reason and act as if they thought it would. With what eager desire, expectation, and confidence, do they look at these objects of sense! And how do these babbles (for so I call them as compared with intellectual and divine pleasures) dazzle their eyes, confound their reason, pervert their consciences, set all their passions on fire, and precipitate them, at the hazard of their everlasting interests, into practices the most fraudulent, cruel, and oppressive!—Which leads me to observe further, that in regard,

2. *Of the mode of acquiring* wealth men reason very mistakenly.

Wealth does not fall to the lot of all; and the ascent from a low station to that of opulence and honour, is usually slow, steep, and slippery. But multitudes, at the very setting off, mistake it. Their eager
 desire

desire of success is by false reasoning converted into assurance of it. They *will* be rich, and their imagination instantly realizing the object, the measures that should be taken to secure it are deranged by precipitancy. Industry, integrity, prudence and opportunity, have a great influence on worldly prosperity, but above all the smiles of Providence.

In regard of the first of these there is perhaps no failure here: they exert every nerve, compass sea and land to gain their point. But truth and probity, or at least frankness and generosity, standing in their way, these must be thrust aside: so they miss their end, forgetting that honesty is the best policy. Or if conscience is not thus in the beginning laid asleep, the plans they frame, for want of coolness and consideration, are not properly digested, or warily pursued, and so they fail. Or if this is not the case, opportunity—the favourable moment for carrying a purpose into execution—is missed. And then providence is overlooked; their immoderate love of the world, which is their idol, shuts God out of their thoughts; or, if they do at all advert to that influence on which the success of their endeavours depends, their reasoning upon it is essentially wrong. So God is justly provoked to blast their schemes, or to punish them yet more sensibly, by converting the success he permits them to meet with into a curse, and so making their riches their ruin. “He that trusteth,” says Solomon, “in his riches, shall fall*.” And “they that will be rich,” says the apostle, “fall into temptation, and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil, which while some co-

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* Prov. xi. 28.

veted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows *."— Once more,

3. Men reason deceitfully concerning *the term of enjoying* the wealth they acquire.

From their vehement passion for riches, and the prodigious expence they are at to procure them, it is evident they conceive highly both of the *greatness* and the *continuance* of that enjoyment they expect. For who would put out all his strength, and endanger his happiness in another world, for a thing of naught, and which he knew would be no sooner got than lost? But men are deceived in both these particulars. As to the first, it has been already shewn, that it is not in the nature of wealth to satisfy the vast desires of the soul: let a man therefore possess ever so large an abundance of it, there will still remain a vacuity in his mind, and of consequence his riches cannot make him completely happy.

But suppose his idea of worldly enjoyment to be moderate, and within the bounds of reason, even of such enjoyment he may be disappointed. Few who have compassed their object, and acquired the exact portion of wealth they had marked out to themselves, have found that comfort resulting from it, which they naturally enough expected. The fruition hath been allayed by a variety of unforeseen circumstances, if not wholly defeated by bodily disorders, or troubles of a kind that riches cannot prevent or sooth.

But admitting still further, that the enjoyment exactly answers his expectation, yet how short is the term of possession! Very quickly, perhaps upon his tasting the sweets of affluence, he is deprived of it.

By

* 1 Tim. vi. 9, 10.

By fraud, or force, or some other calamity, he is cast down from the eminence he had taken such pains to reach, into an abyss of poverty and wretchedness. "Charge them," says the apostle, "that are rich in this world, not to trust in uncertain riches*." Or if no such accident befalls him, yet while he is promising himself many years enjoyment of his wealth, death is preparing to turn him out of possession.

This has sometimes happened, and our Lord mentions it, in one of his parables, with a view to illustrate this very point of the deceitfulness of riches. "The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, 'This will I do, I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there will I bestow my fruits, and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided †?' " Could any one reason more mistakenly about riches than this unhappy man did? And how justly did he merit the character of a *fool*, which our Lord gives him! The number of such fools is not small: for though the like event may not have happened to the greater part of the rich, yet it is too evident that the majority look forward to futurity with the same sanguine expectations this man did.

But suppose there are persons, here and there, who hold the peaceable possession of their wealth, with a relish for all the comforts it can procure them, for twenty or thirty years; how short is the term! And will

* 1 Tim. vi. 17.

† Luke xii. 16,—20.

will a man of sense say, that a few instances of this sort will justify the wild reasonings, and confident hopes of him, who sets out on the rapid career of accumulating wealth at the expence of ease and health, if not of conscience? Certainly not. How great then is “the deceitfulness of riches!”—It remains now to consider the third and last thing our Saviour mentions, as an obstruction to the due operation of God’s word on the heart, and that is,

THIRDLY, *The pleasures of this life*, or, as Mark expresses it, “the lusts of other things.”

Here we need not be very particular, for as riches are the means of procuring pleasures, and most generally coveted with that view, the same folly and criminality we have charged to the account of the avaricious, is, with a little variation of circumstances, to be imputed likewise to the sensualist. Pleasure indeed abstractedly considered is a real good; the desire of it is congenial with our nature, and cannot be eradicated without the destruction of our very existence. This is not therefore what our Lord condemns. He well knew that there are passions and appetites proper to men as men, that the moderate gratification of them is necessary to their happiness, and of consequence that the desire of such gratification is not sinful. But the pleasure he prohibits is that which results from the indulgence of irregular desires, I mean such as are directed to wrong objects, and such as are excessive in their degree.

With respect to the former, men are universally agreed that they are criminal; offensive to God, injurious to society, and destructive to him who indulges them. The murderer, adulterer, and others that might be mentioned, we behold with abhorrence. But it is
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the latter kind of pleasures our Saviour has here chiefly in view, those which are in themselves innocent, but become criminal by excess. And it is from this quarter that danger is most to be apprehended, in regard of the generality of mankind. For as it is difficult in many cases, to draw the line exactly between moderation and excess, men have a thousand ways of excusing what is wrong, and of flattering themselves that their pleasures are innocent when they are really hurtful. There are, however, certain rules by which every one may be enabled to decide upon this question for himself, provided his passions and appetites are not under an undue influence. Innocent pleasures no doubt become criminal, when, instead of invigorating, they relax and enfeeble our spirits; when they take up too much of our time, and so obstruct the regular discharge of duty; when they are an occasion of evil to others; and above all, when they so steal upon our affections, as to indispose us to the more noble and refined enjoyments of virtue and religion.

And now, it were endless to enumerate the many particulars that fall under the general character of *the pleasures of this life*. Nature has provided objects for all the senses wonderfully adapted to afford them delight; and men have employed their utmost wit and ingenuity, so to combine, arrange, and diversify them, as to heighten and refine the delight. Hence all the scenes of splendour that dazzle the eye, all the soft and harmonious sounds that captivate the ear, and all the highly-flavoured delicacies that please the taste. Hence the amusements, recreations, and diversions of various description, that every where abound, and among people of every rank and condition. These are *the things* our Saviour speaks of which men *lust after*.

after. That they may have the means of procuring them, is the end they propose by the pains they take to get rich; and to the enjoyment of them, they devote all the time they can sequester from their worldly labours. Pleasure is the grand thing; their happiness is bound up in it. To the gratification of this passion, every thing must submit. So they lose sight, not only of God, but of all intellectual enjoyments, and at length, through excess, become incapable of relishing those very pleasures, which they account the chief good.

Having thus taken a general view of the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world, our next business is to shew, how they obstruct the due operation of God's word on the heart. But this we shall dismiss to the next opportunity, and close what has been said, with a serious address to three sorts of persons, the—*careful*—the *covetous*—and the *voluptuous*.

I. As to those of the first description, the *careful*.

Your case, my friends, is truly pitiable, and all charitable allowance ought to be made for the unavoidable infirmities of human nature. It is not affluence but subsistence, or at most competence, that is your object. You are, however, not wholly inexcusable. Prudence and industry are amiable virtues; but your anxiety, exceeding the bounds of reason, is offensive to God and injurious to yourselves, and therefore deserving of censure. It involves in it, a criminal distrust of the faithfulness and goodness of divine Providence; and this surely is very disingenuous in those who fear God, for to such I am now more especially addressing myself. What! have you entrusted your immortal interests to the care of the blessed God, and can you hesitate a moment upon the question respecting your temporal

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poral concerns? Have you been hitherto provided with the necessaries of life, and can you suppose your heavenly Father, who knoweth that you have need of these things, will desert you for time to come? Besides, this undue solicitude about the world, is hurtful to you in many respects. Instead of forwarding, it rather obstructs your affairs. It makes you unhappy, restless, and miserable. And, what is worse, it is a great hinderance to your progress in religion, as will hereafter be more largely shewn.

Let me beseech you, then, to be upon your guard against this evil temper. Resist every temptation to it. Check the first risings of it. Put the best face you can upon your affairs. Oppose your desires to your wants, and the good you actually do possess to that you are in the anxious pursuit of. Give diligence to make your calling and election sure. Cherish in your breast a divine faith. Be thoroughly established in the doctrine of a particular providence. Frequently call to mind the interpositions of that providence in your favour. In a word, "be careful for nothing: but in every thing, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God *."

2. As to the *avaricious*.

Permit me, Sirs, to expostulate with you a moment upon the extreme absurdity of your reasoning, and the horrid criminality of your temper and conduct. It is not subsistence, competence, or affluence only, you covet; it is the world, the whole world. But the object is not to be attained, or if it were, it would not satisfy. How vain then your *desires*! But your expectations are not boundless like your desires, they are

* Philip. iv. 6.

are held within narrower limits. Yet we may venture to affirm they are extravagant; for the desires of the avaricious have such an influence on their hopes, that it is scarce possible their expectations should be moderate. You sanguinely hope for an object, which will very probably elude your pursuit; or, if compassed, will not afford you the comfort you promise yourself from it. How vain then are your *expectations*! But such is your love of the world, you are resolved at all adventures to make it your grand object. Be it so then. Carry your resolution into practice. Put out all your strength. Spend the greater part of your life in the pursuit. Leap over the mounds of honour and justice. And at length seize your prey. But what, what do you gain? Your gain is loss; the loss of health, peace, reputation, conscience, life, and—Oh tremendous thought!—your immortal soul.

Nor should it be thought strange, that the love of the world is punished with the loss of the soul: It is most deserving of such punishment; indeed the latter is the natural and necessary result of the former. What wretched disingenuity, to love the world more than God, that is, to love him not at all!—to prostitute the bounty of your Sovereign to the purpose of dethroning him! A crime that wants a name for it. And how is it possible, that a soul thus depraved should be happy? Such depravity, if not cured, necessarily brings after it misery.—How vain then are all your *desires*, your *expectations*, and your *exertions*! O that we could convince you of your folly and sin! O that we could stop you in your mad career!

But their conduct, who, under a profession of religion, make the world their object, is still more preposterous, base, and ruinous. What! will you, Sirs, ha-
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ving heard the word, and to appearance received it into your hearts, suffer the briers and thorns to grow up with the seed and choak it? yea, more than this, cherish the noxious weeds of detestable avarice? If so, what may you reasonably expect as the fruit of this, your baseness and perfidy, but disappointment and sorrow in this world, and the wrath of God in that to come? Can you wonder, "resolving," at all adventures, "to be rich, that you fall into temptation, and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition? For the love of money is the root of all evil, which, while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows*." Hear, O hear, with solemn attention, the sentence of provoked justice and abused mercy, denounced upon you. "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered, and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire †." Would to God, we could awaken you to repentance, ere it is too late!

But, while we are dissuading men from the love of the world, have we no object to hold up to their view of superior value and excellence, to captivate their attention and engage their pursuit? We have. Hear the voice of Wisdom, listen to the gracious entreaties of him who has immense wealth at his disposal, and a heart freely to bestow it on all who in earnest seek it. "I love them that love me, and those that seek me early shall find me. Riches and honour are with me; yea, durable riches and righteousness. My fruit is better

* 1 Tim. vi. 9, 10.

† James v. 1, 2, 3.

better than gold, yea, than fine gold, and my revenue than choice silver. I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment. That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance; and I will fill their treasures *."—I have only now to address myself in a few words,

3. To the *voluptuous*.

The pleasures of the world are your object. But let me beseech you, Sirs, to consider a moment the extreme folly, sin, and danger of indulging this passion. It sensualizes the mind, and renders it incapable of those intellectual improvements and refined pleasures for which it was originally formed. It debases men to the rank of the brute creation. It brings them into contempt among the wise, virtuous, and good. It robs them of their time which was given them, for the important purposes of glorifying God, serving their generation, and preparing for another world. It precipitates them into extravagancies which often prove fatal, not only to their character, but their worldly prosperity, and their very existence. It brings a tremendous load of guilt upon their consciences, arms death with invincible terrors, and plunges them in all the miseries of that world, where this passion cannot be gratified, and where there is not a drop of water to cool the parched tongue. For the truth of what we thus affirm, we appeal to the dictates of sound reason, to the sentence of Scripture, to the united testimony of all wise and good men, to your own painful feelings in an hour of satiety and disgust, and to the confessions and exclamations of an infinite multitude of profligate sinners in the decline of life, and at the hour of death. Nor can you wonder, that such should be the effect

* Prov. viii. 17,—41.

effect of the lawless gratification of brutal appetites and passions. How fit that men should “eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices.* !” How fit that they who have been “lovers of pleasure, more than lovers of God †,” should “lie down in sorrow ‡,” and “mourn at the last, when their flesh and their body are consumed || !”

Let me then beseech you, O ye who have been hitherto “given to pleasures §,” and have “lived deliciously ¶,” seriously to consider these things. Why should you throw the reins upon the neck of your lusts, and wilfully resolve upon your own ruin? Why should you tempt down the vengeance of Almighty God upon your head, by ungratefully abusing the bounty of his providence? Is suicide no sin? Are the pleasures of sense, a valuable consideration for the loss of the soul? — But if, after all our remonstrances and expostulations, ye are determined to “walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes, know ye, that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment **.”

Thus would we fain stem the torrent of this wretched insanity, bring men to their senses, and convince them, that by an excessive love of pleasure, they are entailing upon themselves substantial misery. But do we mean to annihilate all idea of pleasure, and to throw every possible obstruction in your way to happiness? — That would be cruel indeed! No. The reverse is our object. We wish to persuade you of a plain and most interesting truth, attested by the word of God and the experience of the best of men, that religion is true wisdom, and that “her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all

* Prov. i. 31.

† 2 Tim. iii. 4.

‡ Isa. l. 11.

|| Prov. v. 11.

§ Isa. xlvi. 8.

¶ Rev. xviii. 7.

** Eccles. xi. 9.

all her paths peace *.” Her form is most beautiful, however she may have been misrepresented by prejudice, and her counsels most soft and engaging, however rejected by a vain world. “ She hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars. She hath killed her beasts, she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table. She hath sent forth her maidens, she crieth upon the highest places of the city. Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither; as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled. Forfaketh the foolish and live; and go in the way of understanding †.” Oh! may you be persuaded to accept of her generous invitation, and to partake of this delicious entertainment—an entertainment prepared at an expence that surpasses all human imagination! So will you be convinced, by your own happy experience, that he who renounces the pleasures of sin for the pleasures of religion, makes an exchange to his unspeakable advantage in the present life, as well as his infinite emolument in the world to come.

PART II.

“ SOME seeds,” our Saviour tells us in the text, “ fell among thorns: and the thorns sprung up and choaked them †.” This figurative account of the WORLDLY-MINDED HEARER we have explained, assisted by our Lord’s own exposition of it in the following words, “ He that received seed among the thorns, is he that heareth the word: and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choak the word, and he becometh

* Prov. iii. 17. † Prov. ix. 1—6. ‡ Matt. xiii. 7.

becometh unfruitful *. The man of this character receives the word, professes it, and for some considerable time, if not to the end of his life, perseveres in his profession. He is, however, unfruitful. The causes of his unfruitfulness are now under consideration. These our Lord hath particularly mentioned, namely, the *cares, riches, and pleasures* of the world.—Of each of these we have proposed, therefore, to give some general account—to shew you how an undue attention to them obstructs the operation of God's word on the heart—and to represent to you the sad event of such intimate commerce with the world. The first was the subject of the former sermon: and we go on,

II. To enquire how the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world operate to prevent the salutary effect of God's word on the hearts of men.

There is no profiting by the word we hear, without duly weighing and considering it. Now, there are three things necessary to our practising the great duty of consideration with effect—*Leisure—Composure—*and *Inclination* to the business. But the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world deprive men of all these, or at least, make considerable encroachments on them.

FIRST, *Leisure.*

Ground choaked with briars and thorns, affords not room for the seed cast upon it to expand and grow. In like manner, he, whose attention is wholly taken up with secular affairs, has not leisure for consideration. He can scarce find time for hearing the word, much less for reading the Bible, meditating on divine truths, and examining his heart. And however good men, when employed about their worldly business, can every now and then advert to the concerns of their souls,

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and frequently in the course of the day, dart an affectionate prayer to Heaven; it is quite otherwise with the unhappy man, whose case we are describing. Each avenue of his heart, is so closely occupied by the world, that not a serious thought can enter, except by stealth or surprize.

Say, you who are oppressed with the cares, or absorbed in the pleasures of life, whether this is not the fact? What is it first catches your imagination when you awake in the morning? What is it engrosses your attention all the day? What is it goes with you to your bed, and follows you through the restless hours of night? What is it you are constantly thinking of at home, abroad, and in the house of God? It is the world. Oh sad! not a day, not an hour, scarce a moment in reserve, for a meditation on God, your soul, and an eternal world! And can religion exist where it is never thought of, or gain ground in a heart where it is but now and then adverted to? As well might a man expect to live without sustenance, or get strong without digesting his food. That then, which deprives men of time for consideration, is essentially injurious to religion. And such is the charge our Saviour exhibits against the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world; for the truth of which, we appeal, not only to the bulk of mankind, but to multitudes who profess religion, and flatter themselves with a notion, that they are in the fair way to heaven.

Time is the gift of God, a boon of inestimable value: What pity it should be abused or trifled with! I say not, that it is to be wholly employed in meditation and devotion. That man mistakes religion, who, under a notion of exalted piety, turns his back on the world, and retires into obscurity. There is a time for every

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every thing under the sun. A time for prudent consideration about our temporal interests. A time for honest labour, to procure a subsistence, and to acquire a competence. A time for food and sleep. And a time for recreation and amusement. We may enjoy what God has given us as well as labour for it.

But upon what principle is religion to be deprived of its just claims? If it is the most important of all concerns, and if it cannot be forwarded without consideration and prayer, it has a just title to a convenient share of our time for those purposes. God has appointed one day in seven, for our repose and his worship, and shall worldly anxieties and pleasures defraud both him and us of our right? He hath required us to allot a portion of each day for the devotion of the family and closet, and shall this portion, though small, be avariciously engrossed by secular affairs? It is the voice of reason, that our thoughts should every now and then advert to the concerns of our souls; and shall the perplexing cares, and vain amusements of life, cruelly exact of us every moment that passes? What are such horrid depredations as these, on time, better than sacrilege? And what the tamely submitting to them than suicide?—But to proceed. The world not only deprives men of time and opportunity for consideration, but also,

SECONDLY, Of *Composure*.

By composure, I mean that calmness or self-possession, whereby we are enabled to attend soberly and without interruption to the business we are about. Consideration implies this in it; For how is it possible that a man should duly consider a subject, whether civil or religious, coolly reason upon it, and thoroughly enter into the spirit of it; if his mind is all the while occupied

pied with a thousand other things, foreign to the matter before him? In order, therefore, to our doing justice to any question of importance, we must rid our minds of all impertinent thoughts, be self-collected, and fix our attention steadily to the point. How difficult this is I need not say. Studious people feel the difficulty; and in regard of religion, the best of men are sensible of their weakness in this respect, and deeply lament it. But where the world gains the ascendant, this difficulty is increased, and, in some instances, becomes almost insuperable. Let me here describe to you, in a few words, the almost incessant hurry and confusion of their minds, who answer to the three characters in our text of the *careful*, the *covetous*, and the *voluptuous*. So you will clearly see, how impossible it is for persons thus circumstanced, to pay that attention to religious subjects, which is necessary in order to their being profited by them.

1. The case of him who is swallowed up with the anxious *cares of life* is truly lamentable.

It is not riches the unhappy man aims at, but a competence, or perhaps a mere subsistence. The dread of being reduced, with his family, to extreme poverty, harrows up his very soul. The horrid spectres of contempt, famine and a prison, haunt his imagination. He fancies himself turned out of his dwelling, his substance torn from him by merciless creditors, his children crying for bread, and he and they just on the point of starving. To escape these miseries, or to hold them at a distance, he racks his invention, exerts all his powers, and allows himself scarce time to eat or sleep. These sad thoughts, engendered by gloominess and timidity, strengthened by a sinful distrust of providence, and promoted by the artful suggestions of satan, follow him
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day and night, embarrass his mind, prey upon his spirits, and make him wretched to the last degree. Like a distracted man, now he is looking this way, and then that; now making a fruitless effort, and then on the point of giving up all for lost. How deplorable this state of the mind!

And how incapable is a man, thus circumstanced, of coolly thinking on the great things of religion! Does he attempt in his retirement to fix his attention to some divine subject? he instantly fails in the attempt, cares like a wild deluge rush in upon his soul, and break all the measures he had taken to obtain a little respite from his trouble. Does he go down upon his knees to pray? He has scarce uttered a sentence, before he is thrown into confusion by disordered thoughts and wandering imaginations; so that the dread of affronting God by offering the sacrifice of fools, obliges him to desist. Does he go to the house of God? thither his anxieties follow him, stand like so many centinels at each avenue of his soul, to shut out all instruction from his ear and all comfort from his heart; so that he goes from thence as uninformed and unhappy as he came thither. Thus do the cares of the world choak *the word*, and choak *the man himself*, as Luke expresses it*: like thorns and briers, they pierce and suffocate him, at once torment his heart and enfeeble his powers. And though they may not, in every instance, proceed to the lengths we have represented, yet it is easy to imagine, from what has been said, how they prove, in cases less distressing, mighty obstructions to the salutary effect of the word on the heart.

2. The like effect hath an *eager desire after riches* to disqualify men for consideration.

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Avaricious

* Luke viii, 14.

Avaricious desires may not indeed be attended with the anguish just described, yet they no less effectually disable the powers of the soul for the right discharge of religious duties. Wealth becoming a man's object, and its deceitful charms getting fast hold on his heart, the prize will be continually in his eye, and the means of acquiring it engross all his thoughts. His speculations, reasonings, deliberations, and efforts, will all be directed to this point. Now he is laying his plan, adjusting each circumstance, considering their various and united effect, and providing for all contingencies that may arise and thwart his views. And then you see him carrying his plans into execution, with unremitting ardour, setting each engine at work, and looking forward with eager expectation to the event. If he succeeds, his passion for wealth collects fresh strength, and without allowing him to pause a while; to enjoy the fruit of his labour, pushes him on to some further exertion. If he fails, the failure stimulates him to some bolder enterprize. And thus he is employed from day to day; his thoughts incessantly wandering from one object of sense to another, his invention perpetually on the rack, and his passions, like the raging sea, in a continual agitation.

Now, amidst this tumult of the mind, how can a man think soberly of the great truths and duties of religion, of the state of his soul, and the concerns of another world? If we could suppose him in the least degree well affected to religion, which indeed is scarce imaginable, it were yet almost impossible for him to pay proper attention to it. Perhaps the form is not wholly laid aside; but what is it more than a form? "He draweth nigh to God with his mouth, and honoureth him with his lips, but his heart is far from him."

him *." When on his knees he is still in the world : when he is worshipping God in his family he is still pursuing his gain. His closet is an accounting house, and his church an exchange. Surely then, our Lord knew what he said, when, to the astonishment of his disciples, he affirmed, that " it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God †."—From what has been said, it is easy to see also,

3. How an eager attention to *worldly pleasures* must have the like effect, to render the mind incapable of serious consideration.

Scenes of splendour, gaiety, and sensual delight are ever before the eyes of men of this character. Their thoughts are incessantly employed about these objects, realizing the fancied bliss they have in prospect before it is actually enjoyed, devising the necessary means of acquiring it, pressing on to it with ardent desire, grudging every moment that holds them back from it, and reckoning no time too long for the possession of what they account the chief good.

And what is the effect in regard of religion ? Do these sons of pleasure, vouchsafe at any time to present themselves among the sons of God, in the temple of devotion ? one may easily imagine what kind of offering they bring with them ; not that of a willing heart, but of an hour sequestered against the will, from their extravagant pursuits. Do they ever retire, for a few moments, to read and pray ? one may affirm, though not admitted into the secret counsels of their hearts, that they read without understanding, and pray without devotion. For how is it possible, that a mind thus hurried, thus dissipated, thus intoxicated with vain amusements,

* Matt. xv. 8.

† Mark x. 25.

amusements, should be capable of thinking soberly of God and a future world, of death, judgment, and eternity! Communion with heaven amidst this riot of the mind, would be a greater solecism than philosophising at a feast of Bacchus, or demonstrating a problem at a masquerade. But I forbear.—There remains one thing more to be considered, in order to shew how the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life operate, to prevent the salutary effect of the word on the heart. They not only deprive men of *time* and *composure* for serious consideration, but,

THIRDLY, Of all *Inclination* to it.

Where indeed the love of the world prevails, let a man's profession be ever so splendid, there is no real religion; so that such an one neither has, nor ever had a disposition to serious consideration. But what I mean, is to shew, that an eager attention to the things of this life, confirms the habit of inconsideration, and tends, where there is an aptitude to meditation, to weaken and deprave it. A mind wholly occupied with the objects of sense, is not only estranged from the great realities of religion, but averse to them. As it has neither leisure nor calmness for sublime contemplations, so it has no taste or relish for them. "The carnal mind is enmity against God *." And the more carnal it grows, by incessant commerce with the world, the more does that prejudice and enmity increase. What violence are such men obliged to put upon themselves, if at any time, by some extraordinary circumstance, they are prevailed on to think of the concerns of their souls! The business is not only awkward, as they are unaccustomed to it, but it is exceeding irksome and painful. And something of this, good men themselves

* Rom. viii. 7.

themselves feel, when captivated for a while, by the cares and pursuits of the world. What a strange backwardness do they complain of, to holy and devout exercises! In their slumbers, though not fallen into a deep sleep, they have little heart for those vigorous exercises of the mind, which a rapid progress in religion demands. "They have put off their coat," as the church expresses it in the song of Solomon*, "and how shall they put it on!"

Now, if a hearty inclination to any business, is necessary to a man's considering it, and so being in a capacity to pursue it with attention and success; whatever tends to abate that inclination, or to confirm the opposite aversion, is essentially injurious to such business. In like manner, with respect to the great concerns of religion, the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world, by wholly occupying the mind, indispose it to consideration; and so choak the word, and render it unfruitful.—And now this leads us to consider,

III. The sad event of such undue commerce with the world. The unhappy man, not having leisure, calmness, or inclination to attend to the word, *neither understands it, believes it, or is obedient to it*: and continuing in this wretched state of ignorance, impenitence and unbelief, he is finally lost.

1. He understands not the word of the kingdom.

And indeed how should he, taken up, as he almost constantly is, with thinking, reasoning, and caring about other matters? Or if he has a speculative acquaintance with the truths of religion, it is not, it cannot be experimental and practical. Ah! how ignorant is he of God, his perfections, ways, and works! Of himself, his capacities and interests, his true state and condition, the

* Cant. v. 3.

the plague of his heart, and the danger to which he is exposed! Of Christ, the glories of his person, redemption, and kingdom! Of the beauty of holiness, the refined pleasures of religion, and the joys and triumphs of heaven! These are things which the objects of sense thrust far away from his view, so that he seldom, if ever, spends a thought about them. And however sagacious he is in the management of his temporal affairs, he is a perfect fool in his conceptions and reasonings about matters of infinitely greater moment. Like a wretch immured in a cell, he contents himself with viewing, by the help of a glimmering taper, the childish figures his fancy has chalked out around him; while the man of wisdom walks in the light of broad day, viewing the stupendous works of God, by the aid of that great luminary, the sun of righteousness, to his infinite joy and emolument.—And as he understands not the word of the kingdom, so,

2. Neither does he believe it.

It is not his professing it that proves he believes it. Nor does his admitting it all to be true, in the cold, lifeless manner of the generality of people, constitute him a believer in the sense of the New Testament. No, he who believes the gospel to the salvation of his soul, must enter into the spirit of it. But how can that man be supposed to have entered into the spirit of the gospel, of whose heart the god of this world has taken quiet possession? To a mind, wherein this wretched demon lives, reigns, and domineers, the faith as well as the knowledge of divine truth is an utter stranger. And O how deplorable the character?—To profess the faith, and at the same time to be no better than an infidel!—to take pains to persuade himself and all
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about him that he believes, and yet to remain under the dominion of unbelief and sin!--Again,

3. Not rightly understanding or believing the word of the kingdom, he is not obedient to it.

Fruit is not to be expected from seed sown among thorns, at least not good fruit or much of it. The ears will be, like those in Pharaoh's dream, thin, withered, and blasted with the east wind. So Luke expressly says, he "brings no fruit to perfection*." If you look for "the fruit of the Spirit," such as "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance †," you will be miserably disappointed. None of these divine graces live in his heart, and shine in his life: at best you will discover only the bare semblance of them, a kind of fruit unpleasing to the eye, and disgusting to the taste. Amidst the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world, the faint, dwindling, impotent efforts of something like religion are quickly suffocated and lost.--Here perhaps it will be expected, that we enter into a particular consideration of this beautiful and striking expression of our Saviour's--"they bring no fruit to perfection."--But as it will be the business of the next discourse, to give a particular account of the nature and quality of the fruit required of every genuine Christian, we shall enlarge no further here.--And now,

4. And lastly, What is the final issue of all? Why, the man himself, as well as the seed, is choaked: for so Luke expresses it ‡.

And Oh! how sad, after a profession protracted to a considerable length, not renounced by avowed apostasy, or disgraced by any gross act of immorality; to miss of heaven and all its joys and triumphs, and "to be turned

* Chap. viii. 14.

† Gal. v. 22, 23.

‡ Luke viii. 14.

ed into hell with the wicked, and all the nations that forget God * !” O tremendous, to receive the curse of the barren fig-tree from his lips whose name you have professed ! to be driven like chaff before the wind ! and not having brought forth good fruit to be hewn down and cast into the fire !

Thus have we considered the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world ; their operation on that class of hearers our Lord means here to describe ; and the sad event of all. Let us now close the whole with some seasonable exhortations.

1. Let the professors of religion have no more to do with the world than duty clearly requires.

This is sound, wholesome, scriptural advice. The Bible does not teach us to affect preciseness and singularity, to assume a severe, gloomy, ascetic countenance and manners, and peevishly to withdraw ourselves from society and the civil concerns of life : yet surely it does require more of us than escaping the gross pollutions of the world, and the preserving a good sober moral character. Otherwise I know not what tolerable rational account to give of the following precepts—“ If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me †.”—“ Whosoever will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God ‡.”—“ Be not conformed to this world ; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind §.”—“ Come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing §.”—“ Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness ¶.”—“ See that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise **.”—“ Abstain

* Psal ix. 17.

† Matth. xvi. 24.

‡ James iv. 4.

§ Rom. xii. 2.

§ 2 Cor. vi. 17.

¶ Ephes. v. 11.

** Ver. 15.

—“ Abstain from all appearance of evil *” — A Christian, especially if he be a good natured man, is in greater danger from compliances of a doubtful ill tendency, than from temptations to direct immoralities. The latter he will know how easily to resist, while the former may prove a snare to him before he is aware. Heaven is the good man’s object, and in order to imbibe a spirit suited to that state, he will find the discipline of the heart a necessary and painful business; but how that can be carried on amidst the drudgery of avaricious pursuits, or the levity of vain amusements, I am at a loss to say. Let us then “ endure hardness as good soldiers of Christ;” and as we wish “ to please him who has chosen us to be soldiers,” let us take heed how “ we entangle ourselves with the affairs of this life †.”

2. If thorns before we are aware get in, let us instantly root them out.

The best of men are exposed to temptation, and too often foiled though not overcome by it. The Christian like an eagle soars to heaven, yet his flight may on a sudden be impeded by the grossness of the atmosphere through which he passes; and though like that prince of birds, he has an eye that can look at the sun, yet his eye may for a moment be captivated by the false glare of terrestrial objects. But he will quickly, animated by the grace of God, turn away his eye from beholding vanity, and with redoubled vigour renew his flight to heaven. He has a taste for sublime enjoyments, and that taste, though it may be in a degree vitiated, cannot be wholly lost.

Consider then, O men of God, your high character and noble birth. Walk worthy of the vocation where-

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* 1 Theff. v. 22.

† 2 Tim. ii. 3, 4.

with you are called. Demean yourselves in a manner becoming your holy profession and glorious prospects. If the objects of sense, before you are aware, catch your attention and captivate your passions, disentangle yourselves as quickly as possible from the charm. Hesitate not a moment. Exert all the power of Christian resolution. Tear up by the roots the briars and thorns of worldly cares, and the poisonous weeds of fascinating pleasures. They are of luxuriant growth, and if not instantly checked and by severe discipline destroyed, they will overspread the heart, choke every pious sentiment and virtuous affection, and in the end create you infinite trouble and anguish. No time is to be lost. The further you advance in a course of life, which though not directly criminal yet tends to embarrass your mind, weaken your graces, and indispose you to the duties of religion; the more difficult will be your retreat. Oh! how have some good men, in the close of life, lamented in the bitterness of their spirit the advantage which the world has gained over them; and warned those about them to beware of the encroachments, which this insidious enemy imperceptibly makes upon the human heart!

3. Receive the good seed.

It is not enough that the ground is cleared of noxious weeds, if it be not sown with the proper grain. Neither is it sufficient to guard against the corrupt maxims, customs, and manners of the world, if our hearts are not impregnated with divine truth. What that is we have already shewn you. It is "the word of the kingdom," the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. We exhort you therefore to hear the word diligently, to take pains to understand it, to yield a cordial assent to it, to lay it up in your memories, and to revolve it frequently

quently in your minds. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom *." "Receive with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save your souls †." And be assured "it will build you up, and give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified ‡."

An experimental acquaintance with the gospel is the best mean to fortify the heart against the assaults of the world. Reason and observation, every now and then, extort from our lips, a cold feeble acknowledgment, that the riches, honours, and pleasures of this life are uncertain and unsatisfying; yet alas! they still cling about our hearts, disturb the peace of our minds, and obstruct our progress towards heaven. But a believing contemplation on divine truth, fixes such a deep conviction in our bosoms of the vanity of the world, as fails not to interest our warmest passions, and so to have a commanding influence on our conduct. In those happy moments, the world appears very little indeed, just such a trifling object, as it is in the eye of him, who apprehends himself passing out of time into eternity.

Go then, Christian, to the cross of Christ, fix your eye on the suffering Saviour, contemplate his character, and well consider the infinitely benevolent intent of what he endured; and sure I am, you will cry out in the language of the great apostle, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world ||." It is not imaginable how the thorns and briers of worldly cares and pleasures, should get ground in a heart where the word of the kingdom thus takes

* Col. iii. 16.

† James i. 22.

‡ Acts xx. 32.

|| Gal. vi. 14.

takes deep root, spreads on every side, and gains new strength and vigour every day. The reasonings of mere philosophy, will have little effect to combat the stubborn propensities of the heart to the world, and to elevate the soul to God. But the sublime truths of Christianity, accompanied with a divine energy, will not fail to compass these great objects.

Let me then beseech you, Christians, beseech all that hear me, to listen to the voice of divine wisdom, to hang attentively on her lips, to receive her doctrine, and accept her gracious invitations. She bids us to an entertainment the most free, expensive, and delicious; an entertainment that will not fail to please our taste, cheer our spirits, and strengthen our hearts. "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat, yea, come; buy wine and milk, without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live, and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David*."

4. And lastly, Look to God for his blessing.

"Paul may plant, and Apollos water; but it is God that giveth the increase †." We may hear, read, meditate, reflect, watch, and use many good endeavours; but if no regard be had to a superior influence, all will be vain. The world hath so many ways of insinuating itself into our affections, the great enemy of mankind is so insidious and malevolent, and our hearts are so

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* Isa. lv. 1—3.

† 1 Cor. iii. 6.

vain and treacherous ; that if God be not with us, we shall be quickly foiled and overcome.

Trust not then, Christian, your own sagacity, resolution, and strength. Many have done so, and been made ashamed. Prayer is your refuge. Oh ! pray without ceasing. Implore the gracious influences of the Holy-Spirit ; weep and make supplication, as did Jacob, to the angel of the covenant ; resolve with him, that you will not leave him except he bless you. Such importunity, accompanied, as it always is, with circumspection and obedience, will succeed : and how glorious the success ! He is faithful that hath promised. “ My grace is sufficient for thee *.” “ The youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord, shall renew their strength : they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint †.” “ Those that be planted in the house of the Lord, shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age : they shall be fat and flourishing ; to shew that the Lord is upright : he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him ‡.”

* 2 Cor. xii. 9. † Isa. xl. 30, 31. ‡ Psal. xcii. 13, 14, 15.

DISCOURSE V.

THE CHARACTER OF SINCERE HEARERS CONSIDERED.

MAT. xiii. 8.

But other seeds fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundred fold, some sixty fold, some thirty fold.

IT is one, among many other striking proofs of the divinity of our Saviour's mission, that the treatment his gospel meets with in the world, exactly corresponds with his own predictions. In the parable under our consideration, he tells his apostles, that some would pay little or no attention to it; that others, receiving it with great appearance of zeal, would, after a while, upon some offence taken, renounce it; and that a third sort of persons, having more dispassionately professed the Christian name, would, in a course of time, through a too intimate connection with the world, grow indifferent to their profession, and fail of attaining the great object of it, eternal life.

These three distinct characters we have considered under the several denominations of—the INATTENTIVE—the ENTHUSIASTIC—the WORLDLY-MINDED.—And I presume,

presume, the view we have taken of the disingenuous temper, criminal conduct, and final punishment of these unhappy persons, hath deeply affected our hearts. But a scene of a different kind now opens to our view. Although the ministers of this gospel, are “a favour of death unto death,” to multitudes who hear it, yet they are to many others “a favour of life unto life*.” And we may depend upon it, that God will not forget his gracious promise: “My word that goeth forth out of my mouth, shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it †.”

Many there are then, who hear the word of the kingdom, and are thereby made wise unto salvation. The character of these happy persons, we are now to consider, and shall style them, by way of distinction from the former, the SINCERE, that is, genuine Christians. The text says, “Other seeds fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundred fold, some sixty fold, some thirty fold.”

Ground within an inclosure, and properly manured, is better fitted to receive seed, than that on the way-side, in stony places, or in the hedges. Seed sown here at the proper season, and by a skilful hand, will be likely to mingle with the soil, and under the genial influence of the sun, and the falling dew and rain, to spring up and bring forth fruit. But the produce, through a variety of circumstances too numerous to be mentioned, will on some lands and in some countries, be more considerable than others. Such is the figure in our text.

Our Saviour’s exposition of this part of the parable you have in the twenty-third verse—“He that received

* 2 Cor. ii. 16.

† Isa. lv. 11.

ved seed into the good ground, is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it, which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty." Luke expresses it somewhat differently — "That on the good ground, are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience *." — The first thing that strikes us here, is,

1. That these hearers have *honest and good hearts*. The ground must be properly manured and prepared, before the seed can so mingle with it, as to produce fruit. In like manner, the powers of the soul must be renewed by divine grace, before the instructions of God's word can so incorporate with them as to become fruitful. The heart which was prone to deceive, flatter, and impose upon itself, must be made sincere and honest. And the heart which was hard, conceited, and self-willed, must become soft, humble, and teachable. Now, the metaphor, thus explained, gives us a two-fold view of the word of God, as the mean or instrument of mens conversion, and as the seed implanted in their hearts from whence the fruits of obedience proceed. And this account of the matter very well agrees with what we meet with in other passages of Scripture, as particularly in the epistle of James †, where "God" is said "of his own will to beget us with the word of truth;" and in a few verses afterwards, we are represented as "receiving with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save our souls." And it agrees too with the fact, for it frequently so happens that men, who come to the house of God unprepared, and with hearts neither honest nor good, are yet by the preaching of the word, accompanied

* Chap. viii. 15.

† James i. 18. 21.

accompanied with a divine energy, convinced and converted. Their understanding is illuminated, and a new bent is given to their will.—So,

2. They *hear the word* after a different manner, and to a very different purpose from what others do, and from what they themselves formerly did. They hear it with attention, candour, meekness, and simplicity.—And then—to go on with our Saviour's account of these hearers—they,

3. *Understand the word.*

This is not expressly said, as I remember, of either of the former characters. They indeed who are destitute of the grace of God, may have a speculative acquaintance with the gospel; but mingling their own vain conceits with it, and not being sensible of its importance nor imbibing its true spirit, they are to all valuable purposes ignorant of it. This however is not the case with real Christians. They have a right understanding of the gospel. It is in their idea the most simple, and at the same time the most interesting thing in the world; easy to be apprehended, and yet full of infinite majesty and glory. Their knowledge is, in short, experimental and practical.

4. They *keep the word.* The seed once lodged in the heart remains there. It is not caught away by the wicked one, it is not destroyed by the scorching beams of persecution, nor is it choaked by the thorns of worldly cares and pleasures. It is laid up in the understanding, memory, and affections; and guarded with attention and care, as the most invaluable treasure. And indeed how is it imaginable that the man who has received the truth in the love of it, has ventured his everlasting all on it, and has no other ground of hope whatever, should be willing to part with this
good

good word of the grace of God! sooner would he renounce his dearest temporal enjoyments, yea even life itself. Nor does our Saviour, by keeping the word, mean only an attachment to the leading truths of Christianity, and which may therefore with emphasis be called *the word*; he intends also a due regard to all the instructions and precepts of the Bible, the whole revealed will of God. “O that my ways,” says David, “were directed to keep thy statutes *!” And our Lord frequently exhorts his disciples to express their love to him, by *keeping his commandments* †, and observing *his sayings* ‡ — Again,

5. They bring forth fruit. The seed springs up, looks green, and promises a fair harvest. They profess the Christian name, and live answerable to it. Their external conduct is sober, useful, and honourable; and their temper is pious, benevolent, and holy. The fruit they bear is of the same nature with the seed whence it springs. Their obedience is regulated by the word of God, as its rule; and flows from divine principles, such as faith, hope, and love, implanted in their hearts. But of these things we shall treat more largely hereafter.

6. They bring forth fruit *with patience*. It is a considerable time before the seed disseminates, rises into the stalk and the ear, and ripens into fruit. It usually meets with many checks in its progress, through inclement weather and other unfavourable circumstances. So that the “husbandman,” as the apostle James says, “waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain ||.” And thus is aptly signified the gradual progress

* Plal. cxix. 5.

† John xiv. 15.

‡ Ver. 24.

|| James v. 7.

progress of religion in the heart, the opposition it meets with from various quarters, and the resolution, self-denial, and perseverance necessary to the Christian character.—In one word,

7. And lastly. They bring forth fruit in different degrees, “some thirty, some sixty, and some an hundred fold.” They are none of them unfruitful, but the produce is more or less, agreeable to the kind of soil, the means of cultivation, and the difference of the seasons.

The amount of the whole is this, Those hearers who are sincere, will derive real profit from the word; and give clear proof they do so, by bringing forth fruit, in various degrees, to the glory of God, and their own everlasting advantage. And now, in order to the fully discussing this argument, we shall,

I. Shew the necessity of men’s *hearts* being made *honest and good*, in order to their profiting by the word they hear.

II. Describe the kind of fruit which persons of this character bear, and which furnishes incontestible proof that they are benefited by the word.

III. Consider the variety there is in regard of degrees of fruitfulness, and the reasons of it. And,

IV. Represent the blessedness of such persons, which, though not directly expressed, is yet implied in the general purport of the parable.

I. As to the necessity of the heart’s being made honest and good, in order to mens duly receiving the word and keeping it; this will clearly appear on a little reflection.

I suppose it will scarce be denied, that the will and affections have a considerable influence on the operations of the understanding and judgment. To a
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mind, therefore, under the tyranny of pride and pleasure, positions that are hostile to these passions will not easily gain admission. Their first appearance will create prejudice. And if that prejudice does not instantly preclude all consideration, it will yet throw insuperable obstructions in the way of impartial inquiry. If it does not absolutely put out the eye of reason, it will yet raise such dust before it, as will effectually prevent its perceiving the object. What men do not care to believe, they will take pains to persuade themselves is not true. They will employ all their ingenuity to find out objections, and having cast them with great eagerness into the opposite scale, to positive unexamined evidence, will at length pronounce confidently against the truth, and in favour of error. Such is the manner of the world, and thus do men impose upon themselves in a thousand questions, civil and religious, which thwart their inclinations.

Now the gospel (if the account we have given of it be true) is most humiliating to the pride of the human heart, and most disgusting to that inordinate passion for worldly pleasure which prevails there. Why then should it be thought strange, that men of this character should be violently precipitated by their prejudices into false and dangerous reasonings? To these causes we may, without breach of charity, impute a great deal, if not the whole of that opposition the gospel meets with in the world. Hence the cross of Christ became to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness. And hence multitudes in our time upon their first hearing the gospel are offended, and with the men of Capernaum say, "These are hard sayings, who can hear them?"

If then the word of the kingdom be received and
 kept

kept in the manner it ought, the heart must be first made honest and good. When once a new bias is given to the will and affections, and a man, from a proud, becomes a humble man, from a lover of this world, a lover of God, his prejudices against the gospel will instantly subside. The thick vapours exhaled from a sensual heart, which had obscured his understanding, will disperse; and the light of divine truth shine in upon him with commanding evidence. He will receive the truth in the love of it. The method of salvation by a crucified Jesus, will become highly pleasing to him; and all the little objections which originated, not in sound reason, but in disaffection and perverseness, will vanish. And so that divine saying of our Saviour's will be found to be true, "If any man will do the will of God, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God *."

How important then is regeneration! How earnestly should we pray to God to renew our will! And what pains should we take with ourselves, to subdue our stubborn prejudices and passions! Thus, "laying apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receiving with meekness the ingrafted word," we shall find it "able to save our souls †." The seed thus sown in the understanding, thus insinuating itself into the heart, and thus mingling with the affections, will not fail to spring up, and in due time bring forth fruit.—This leads us,

II. To describe the kind of fruit which such persons will bear. It is good fruit—fruit of the same nature with the seed whence it grows, and the soil with which it is incorporated: of the same nature with the

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gospel

* John vii. 17.

† James i. 21.

gospel itself which is received in faith, and with those holy principles which are infused by the blessed Spirit.

Here let us dwell a little more particularly on the nature and tendency of the gospel. "God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses to them *." No less a person than his own Son he devotes to death for their sakes. This great sacrifice he exhibits to the view of the whole creation, as the most striking spectacle of his just resentment against sin, and the most sure pledge of his tender compassion to the guilty. The merit of this divine Saviour he accepts. The plea he admits in bar of the sentence that hung over the head of the devoted criminal. "Deliver him, (says he,) from going down to the pit, for I have found a ransom." He absolves him, he justifies him, he makes him everlastingly happy. "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died †." So "grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord †." O how inflexible the justice, how venerable the holiness, and how boundless the goodness of God!

And if this be the gospel, who can hesitate a moment upon the question respecting its natural and proper tendency? Who will dare assert, that it is not a doctrine according to godliness? that it does not teach and enforce the purest and most sublime morality? What man who believes it, can admit a doubt, with the divine character thus held up to his view, whether he ought supremely to revere, love, and obey the blessed God? How can piety languish and die amidst this scene of wonders? How can the heart, occupied

* 2 Cor. v. 19. † Rom. viii. 33, 34. † Rom. v. 21.

cupied with these sentiments, remain unsusceptible to the feelings of justice, truth, humanity, and benevolence? How can a man believe himself to be that guilty, depraved, helpless wretch, which this gospel supposes him to be, and not be humble? How can he behold the Creator of the world expiring in agonies on the cross, and follow him thence a pale, breathless corpse to the tomb, and not feel a sovereign contempt for the pomps and vanities of this transitory state? How can he, in a word, see him rising from the dead, triumphing over the powers of darkness, and ascending amid the shouts of angels up into heaven; how can he, I say, be a spectator of all these scenes, and remain indifferent to his everlasting interests? We appeal then to the common sense of mankind, whether the scheme of salvation, thus exquisitely constructed, is not adapted to promote the interests of piety and holiness? It is as evident as that the sun was created, to give light and heat to our world; and the earth made fruitful, to afford food and nourishment to those who inhabit it.

But to bring the matter more fully home to the point before us, what kind of a man is the real Christian? Let us contemplate his character, and consider what is the general course of his life. Instructed in this divine doctrine, and having his *heart made honest and good*, he will be a man of piety, integrity, and purity. “The grace of God, which bringeth salvation, will teach him to deny ungodliness, and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world *.”

As to piety. A due regard to the authority of the blessed God will have a commanding influence upon his temper and practice. With that great Being in his

* Tit. ii. 11, 12.

his eye, he will aim to discharge the duties of religious worship, public and private, with sincerity, attention, and devotion. Remembering the allegiance he owes to his sovereign, he will tremble at the idea of offending him; and calling to mind the various expressions of his bounty, he will feel holy joy in every effort to please him. Relying on his pardoning mercy through Christ, he will ingenuously repent of his sins, and cordially return to his duty. When contemplating his excellencies, he will revere him. When enjoying the tokens of his favour, he will delight in him. When chastened by his afflicting hand, he will submit to him. When assaulted by temptation, he will confide in him. And when employed by him in any difficult and arduous service, he will rely on his gracious assistance.

As to social duties. His conduct will be governed by the rule his divine Master has laid down, of doing to others as he would have them do to him. He will be just in his dealings, faithful to his engagements, and sincere in his friendships. He will aim to live on terms of peace with all, be cautious of giving offence to any, and gladly interpose his best offices, when required, to extinguish the flames of contention, wherever they are kindled. He will feel with the afflicted, and rejoice to have it in his power to smooth the brow of adversity, and to pour consolation into the bosom of the sorrowful. To a mean and base action, he will be nobly superior, and in acts of generosity and kindness, his heart will exult. A stranger to sullen reserve and corroding selfishness, his soul will mingle with kindred souls, and participate largely with others in their pleasures. In a word, by his influence and example, he will endeavour to promote the civil, but
more

more especially, the spiritual and everlasting interests of mankind.—And then,

As to personal duties. He will use the comforts of life, which he enjoys as the fruits of divine benevolence, with temperance and moderation. The wealth and splendour of the world will not be his object: on the contrary, he will hold them in sovereign contempt, when they dispute the pre-eminence with intellectual and divine joys. Of many gratifications he will deny himself, not only that he may have it in his power to do good to others, but may promote his own best interests, by bringing sense into subjection to reason, and the world into obedience to God. His pride he will endeavour to mortify, by severely studying and censuring his own temper and actions, and by candidly judging and excusing those of others. He will think soberly of himself, as he ought to think. His angry passions he will restrain and soften, and a spirit of meekness, gentleness, and forbearance he will cultivate to the utmost of his power. In fine, the salvation of his soul will be his grand object, and the care of that will have the preference to every other concern whatever.

Such are the fruits which they bring forth, who hear the word in the manner our Saviour describes, and who keep it in good and honest hearts. They “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith they are called *;” and their “conversation is, as it becometh the gospel of Christ †.” “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; against such there is no law ‡.” Of this description were the primitive Christians, and, I trust, there are some such to be met with in our times.

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* Eph. iv. 1. † Philip. i. 27. ‡ Gal. v. 22, 23.

But it is not meant by this description of the Christian to raise him above the rank of humanity, or to give a colouring to the picture which it will not bear. He is still a man, not an angel. To fix the standard of real religion at a mark to which none can arrive, is to do an injury to religion itself, as well as to discourage the hearts of its best friends. Absolute perfection is unattainable in the present life. The best of men have failed in one or other, if not each, of those graces which have been described. Abraham was the father of the faithful, yet his faith was more than once shaken by the violent assaults of unbelief. Jacob had an honest heart, yet there was a time when he dissembled. Job was a pattern of patience, yet in a paroxysm of grief, he uttered words that bordered on rebellion. Moses was the meekest man on the earth, yet passion once got the mastery of him. And those mighty champions in the cause of Christianity, the apostles Peter and Paul, were not without their failings, which the Scriptures have faithfully recorded. "In many things we all offend *." Nor is there a Christian living, however exemplary, but is disposed, with all humility, to acknowledge, that he every day fails in his duty, and that his best services are disgraced with folly and sin.

But though perfection, in the strict sense of the term, is not to be admitted, yet the fruit which every real Christian bears, is good fruit. It is so denominated by Christ; and such it truly is, as it springs from right principles, and is conformable in general, to the rule laid down in the word of God. And however, the holiness of the best of men must appear infinitely defective to the eye of Omniscience, and therefore can
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* James iii. 2.

have no merit in it ; yet there is a real obvious difference between the character of a man of this world, and that of a genuine disciple of Christ ; one who is renewed by the grace of God, and one who is under the power of unbelief and sin.

From this view of the kind of fruit which Christians bring forth, we are led to consider the great variety there is among them in regard of degrees of fruitfulness, and the reasons of it. But this we must refer to another opportunity, and add only a few remarks at present, on what has been said.

1. How gracious is that influence which the blessed God exerts, to make the *heart honest and good*; and so dispose it to receive the word, and profit by it !

The corruption of human nature is universal, and much greater than superficial reasoners, and those who are little acquainted with themselves, care to admit. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." Men are set upon criminal indulgences, and are averse to the holy exercises and sublime pleasures of religion. Now, how is a new turn to be given to the mind ? How are men to be persuaded cordially to love that which they so much dislike ? The reasonings of philosophy, however good, will go but a little way in this business. Yea, the nobler reasonings of the gospel too often prove ineffectual. How gracious then that influence of the Holy Spirit, by which a revolution is brought about in the mind ! It was by virtue of this influence that Cornelius became a *devout man*, and was disposed to send for Peter to preach the gospel to him and his family *. It was *the Lord* that opened the heart of Lydia to attend to the things which were spoken to her by Paul †. And it is God, who is rich in

mercy,

* Acts x.

† Acts xvi. 14.

mercy, that quickens all those who were once dead in trespasses and sins, but are now alive to God and religion*. To that grace then, by which we are regenerated and saved, let us cheerfully render our noblest tribute of gratitude and praise.

2. From the nature and tendency of the gospel, which has been just delineated, we derive a strong presumptive evidence of its truth.

The direct positive evidence of prophecy and miracle, must have its weight with every considerate person. But when this of the spirit and intent of the gospel is added, it cannot fail of bearing down all opposition before it. We appeal to the common sense of mankind, upon the question respecting the holy tendency of this divine institution. Let men admit or reject the gospel itself, let them enter into the spirit of it, or harbour prejudices against it; still they cannot deny, that we have here the purest system of morality, and that it is enforced by motives, admirably adapted to touch the noblest feelings of the hearer's heart.

Now whence could this doctrine, so infinitely beneficial to mankind, come, if not from God? Is it imaginable that Satan would, or could change his nature and views, and adopt a plan to emancipate men from his cruel dominion, bring them back to their allegiance to God, and secure to them greater felicity, than that of which he had in the beginning deprived them? Is it imaginable, that any of his emissaries should have ingenuity enough, to devise a scheme so noble, generous, and god-like as this? Or if they had, that they would with mighty zeal, forward a design so repugnant to their own character and views? In short, would any man living, at the hazard of his temporal, not to say his eternal

* Eph. ii. 1.

eternal interests, take pains to palm on his fellow-creatures a known falsehood; in order to persuade them to be the very opposite to himself, holy, just, and good? Whoever answers these questions in the affirmative, must have a stronger faith than that required to make a man a Christian. But if we could for a moment suppose the gospel to be a cunningly devised fable, it were yet worth our while, for the sake of the present advantages which result from the belief of it, to embrace it.

3. Of what importance is it that we converse intimately with the gospel, in order to our bringing forth the fruits of holiness!

Admitting the gospel to be true, the holding back its peculiar glories from our view, under the pretence of their being too mysterious to be apprehended, or too bright to be beheld by the feeble eye of human reason; is not only absurd, but greatly injurious to the cause of real piety and genuine morality. If there be a display of consummate wisdom, transcendent goodness, and immense power, in the contrivance and execution of the plan of redemption; it was no doubt brought forward to our view in the Scriptures, that it might be considered by us. And the contemplation of it, if no other end was to be answered, must afford divine entertainment to a mind rightly disposed. Are the perfections of Deity more strikingly delineated in the volume of the gospel than in that of nature and providence, and may we not reasonably expect a more sublime pleasure in the study of the former than of the latter? But the main thing is, that there are stronger incentives to be met with here to love and obedience than any where else. And since the arguments to be drawn from natural religion will go but a little way to
dispose

dispose and animate us to our duty, ought we not to have recourse to those which are of much higher and nobler consideration?

If then we would have our hearts elevated to God by a devotion the most sublime and ecstatic, if we would have our bosoms warmed with affections the most animating and generous, if we would have our wonder, reverence, confidence, gratitude, and delight kindle into a flame, if we would, in a word, be imitators of God as dear children; let us "with open face behold" in the mirror of the gospel "the glory of the Lord;" so shall we be "changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord*." Let us dwell in our meditations on this divine doctrine, and cordially embrace those exceeding great and precious promises which are here made us; so shall we be "partakers of the divine nature†." The soft and tender emotions of ingenuous sorrow for sin, are both pleasant and salutary. If then we would keep alive in our breasts a penitential sense of sin, and a prevailing aversion to it: and if we would enjoy the heartfelt comfort arising from the hope of forgiveness; let us often ascend mount Calvary, and survey the bleeding cross of the Son of God. Contemplating by faith on his sufferings, our eyes will stream with sorrow and sparkle with joy; we shall at once tremble and rejoice. Would we, again, excel in the social virtues of justice, truth, compassion, benevolence, and friendship; let us sit at the feet of Jesus, listen to his instructions, bind his gospel to our hearts, and make it the man of our counsel. Would we, in fine, be humble, meek, patient, and temperate, be crucified to the world, and have the appetites of sense subjected to the dictates of reason; let

* 2 Cor. iii. 18.

† 2 Pet. i. 4.

Let us make this divine science our chief study, and glory in nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified. "The life I live in the flesh," says the apostle *, "I live by the faith of the Son of God." And if Christians should thus live, ministers should no doubt thus preach as well as live. Would they convert sinners to God, spread the favour of genuine piety, and promote the interests of substantial morality; the gospel must be their daily study, their continual theme of discourse.

4. And lastly. How vain a thing is mere speculation in religion!

The great end of preaching the gospel is to make men holy and good; nor has God afforded us any discovery of his will, but is adapted some way or other to this end. We are to judge therefore of the importance of a doctrine by its practical tendency. To this standard every truth is to be brought, and by it our zeal is to be regulated. If this idea were duly attended to, we should escape the extremes of bigotry and neutrality: we should neither be indifferent to the faith, nor value ourselves on our profound speculations.

Ah! my brethren, to what purpose is it that we are skilled in controversy, can decide on nice questions, and draw the line to a hair between points on which the best of men have differed; if we are without that unction from the Holy One which diffuses a divine favour through the soul, and adds a grateful perfume to our words and actions? "Though I have all knowledge, if I have not charity, I am nothing †." Let us therefore be persuaded, having received the word of the kingdom, to be anxious above all things to maintain a character and conduct agreeable to our holy profession. "Herein is my Father glorified," says our
divine

* Gal. ii. 20.

† 1 Cor. xiii. 2.

divine Saviour, "that ye bear much fruit, so shall ye be my disciples *."

PART II.

IT is the character of the real Christian we are now considering, as drawn by our Saviour in the parable of the sower. "Some" seeds "fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundred fold, some sixty fold, some thirty fold †." Now by "the good ground," our Lord tells us, he means "those who in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience ‡." Having briefly explained these words we have proposed—to shew the necessity of men's hearts being made honest and good, in order to their profiting by the word they hear—to describe the kind of fruit which persons of this character bear—to consider the variety there is in regard of degrees of fruitfulness, and the reasons of it—and to represent the blessedness of such persons, which though not expressed is yet implied in the general purport of the parable. We have discoursed on the two first heads, and proceed now,

III. To consider the great variety there is among Christians in regard of degrees of fruitfulness, and the reasons of it.

Seed sown on good ground brings forth fruit—some *an hundred*, some *sixty*, and some *thirty fold*. Very astonishing instances of fertility we meet with in natural history ||. But though such instances occur not
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* John xv. 8. † Matth. xiii. 8. ‡ Luke viii. 15.

|| Of the extraordinary fruitfulness of corn in Africa, Pliny gives us the following account: "Triticum nihil est fertilius: hoc ei natura tribuit, quoniam eo maxime alat hominem: utpote cum e modio, si sit aptum solum, quale in Byzacio Africae cam-

in the ordinary course of things, it is yet certain that in all ages and in all countries, the produce of the earth is various. And this variety is commonly imputed to difference of soil, or difference in the mode of cultivation, or difference of climates and seasons. In like manner it is a fact, that the fruits which Christians bring forth, though in the general of the same good quality, are very different in quantity: some abound more in good works than others. And if the reasons of this are enquired into, we shall find them somewhat similar to those just mentioned respecting the produce of the earth. Let us first establish the fact, and then examine the reasons of it.

FIRST, as to the fact, that there are degrees of fruitfulness, a little observation will sufficiently prove it.

Fruitfulness may be considered in regard both of the devout affections of the heart, and the external actions of the life; in each of which views it will admit of degrees. As to the former, that is piety, it is certain it may be in a more flourishing state in one man than in another. But comparisons here are dangerous, if indeed they may be allowed of at all. Religion is a personal thing, a matter that lies between God and a man's own soul. And as we should not dare to pronounce definitively upon any one's state towards God, so we should be careful how we give the preference to one religious character before another. In these matters we may be, and often are, very much mistaken.

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“po, centeni quinquageni modii reddantur. Misit ex eo loco
 “Divo Augusto procurator ejus ex uno grano (vix credibile dic-
 “tu) quadringenta paucis minus germina, extantque de ea re epi-
 “stolæ. Misit et Neroni similiter cccxi stipulas ex uno grano.”

And I have no doubt but that at the great day many will be first, who in the opinion of their fellow-mortals were last; and many will be last, who were first. And, however we may be at liberty to judge more freely of their actions, yet to infer certainly from them to the state of mens hearts, is going beyond our line, since the comparative difference between the good works of one Christian and another, may be owing to causes very distinct from that of the inward temper of the mind, as we shall have occasion hereafter to shew. All this I say, to check that forward and wanton speculation which too much prevails among professing Christians, and is a disgrace to religion. "Judge not," says our Saviour, "lest ye be judged*." When we see any rich in good works, we are justified in pronouncing, that religion is in a prosperous state in their hearts. And where we see any less fruitful, charity should teach us to impute the difference to any other possible cause, rather than that of a declension in vital godliness.

But to return. It is with good works themselves that we are here concerned. And it will be readily admitted, that some abound more in the fruits of holiness than others. So it is in our time, and so it has been in every age of the world. The variety is prodigious. What multitudes are there among those who call themselves Christians, of whom we can collect little more from our observation of them, than that they live harmless, sober, and regular lives. Their obedience is rather negative than positive. They bring no dishonour on their profession, nor yet are they very ornamental and exemplary. Others are strictly conscientious and circumspect in their walk, far removed

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* Mat. vii. 1.

from all appearance of gaiety and dissipation, and remarkably serious and constant in their attendance upon religious duties; but, for want of sweetness of temper, or of that sprightliness and freedom which a lively faith inspires, the fruit they bear is but slender, and of an unpleasant flavour. There are those, further, in whom seriousness and cheerfulness are happily united, and whose conduct is amiable in the view of all around them; but then, moving in a narrow sphere, and possessing no great zeal or resolution, their lives are distinguished by few remarkable exertions for the glory of God, and the good of others. And again, there are a number, whose bosoms, glowing with flaming zeal and ardent love, are rich in good works, never weary in well-doing, and full of the fruits of righteousness, to the praise and the glory of God.

Some we see, in the early part of their profession, mounting up with wings as eagles; by and bye, their ardour somewhat abating, they run in the ways of God; and after a while, yet further declining in their vigour, they can only walk in the path to heaven: they however do not turn back. Others, on the contrary, we see contending with the weakness and forwardness of childhood, then collecting the strength and vivacity of youth, so proceeding to the steadiness and judgment of riper years, and at length closing their days amidst all the rich fruits of wisdom and experience. In the garden of God there are trees of different growth. Some newly planted, of slender stature and feeble make, which yet bring forth good, though but little fruit. And here and there you see one that out-tops all the rest, whose roots spread far and wide, and whose boughs are laden in autumn with rich and large fruit. Such variety is there among Christians.

And

And variety there is too in the different species of good works. Some are eminent in this virtue, and some in that; while perhaps a few abound in every good word and work.

Whoever consults the history of religion in the Bible, will see all that has been said exemplified in the characters and lives of a long scroll of pious men. Not to speak here of the particular excellencies that distinguished these men of God from each other, it is enough to observe, that some vastly outshone others. The proportions of a hundred, sixty, and thirty fold, might be applied to patriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, apostles, and the Christians of the primitive church. Between, for instance, an Abraham that offered up his only son, and a righteous Lot, that lingered at the call of an angel. A Moses, that led the Israelites through all the perils of the Red Sea, and the wilderness, to the borders of Canaan, and a pious Aaron, who yet on an occasion temporized with that perverse people. A Joshua, who trampled on the necks of idolatrous princes, and a Sampson, who betrayed his weakness, amidst astonishing efforts of miraculous strength. A David, who was the man after God's own heart, and an Abijah, in whom was found some good thing towards the Lord God of Israel. A Daniel, who was greatly beloved of God, and a Jonah, who, though he feared God, thought he did well to be angry. In a word, between the great apostle of the Gentiles, that flaming seraph in the Christian hemisphere, and a timid unbelieving Thomas.—But let us now,

SECONDLY, Enquire into the grounds and reasons of this disparity among Christians, respecting the fruits of holiness. These are of very different consideration. Many of them will be found to have no connection

connection at all with the inward temper of the mind ; a reflection, therefore, upon them, will give energy to what has been said, in regard of the charity we ought to exercise in judging of others. Let us begin then,

1. With men's *worldly circumstances*.

Much wealth rarely falls to the lot of good people : it does however in some instances. Admitting, then, that the rich and the poor Christian possess an equal share of the grace of God, this difference in regard of their temporal affairs will create a difference in the number, variety, and splendour of their good works. The affluent Christian you will see pouring his bounty on all around him, hospitably throwing open his doors to the stranger, wiping away the falling tear of the widow, providing for the relief of her fatherless children, propping up a house sinking into poverty, contributing generously to charitable institutions, distributing useful books among his poor neighbours, assisting ministers in their labours, and forwarding, in various ways, the general cause of truth, liberty, and religion. These are good works which cannot fail, when known, of exciting admiration. When known, I say, because the modest piety of him who does them, will labour to cast a veil over them, and induce him humbly to acknowledge, when he has done all, that he is, in regard of God, an unprofitable servant.

But the poor Christian can render few, if any of these services, to his fellow-creatures. The utmost he can perhaps do, is, by his daily labour, to feed and cloath his family, and to provide things honest in the sight of all men. His works are of a different kind, the works of industry, contentment, submission and patience. He moves in a narrow sphere, beyond which, however, he often looks with a compassionate and be-

nevolent eye, obliged to substitute the will instead of the deed.

2. *Opportunity* is another ground of distinction among Christians, in regard of fruitfulness.

By opportunity, I mean occasions of usefulness, which arise under the particular and immediate direction of divine Providence. A man shall sometimes be so situated, and such unexpected events take place, as that, by a seasonable exertion of his abilities, he shall be capable of doing great service to the cause of virtue and religion. The stations assigned by Providence to some Christians are particularly favourable to the idea of glorifying God, and promoting the good of society. Moving in elevated spheres, they have numerous and powerful connections, and of consequence great weight and influence. A Daniel shall have such easy access to the presence of a mighty tyrant, as shall enable him to whisper the most beneficial counsels in his ear; and an apostle, by being brought in chains before a no less powerful prince, shall have an opportunity of defending the cause of his divine Master, in the most essential manner. Christians, if such there be, that are admitted at any time into the courts of sovereigns, into the circles of the great, or into the counsels of the wise, may do eminent service to religion by their reasonings, admonitions, and examples. Nor is there any station of life wherein a good man is not now and then called, by some extraordinary circumstance in providence, to special offices of piety and charity; such as instructing the ignorant, reproofing the profane, guiding the doubtful, reclaiming the vicious, edifying the weak, and comforting the distressed. But these opportunities of usefulness occur more frequently in some situations than others, and of consequence

quence the fruitfulness of some Christians is greater than that of others.

3. *Mental abilities* have a considerable influence in this matter.

What shining talents do some good men possess! They have extensive learning, great knowledge of mankind, much sagacity and penetration, singular fortitude, a happy manner of address, flowing language, and a remarkable sweetness of temper. These, and other amiable qualities of a natural kind, uniting with a deep sense of religion, and a warm zeal for the glory of God, give them the advantage in point of general usefulness in society above most around them. They can detect error, and defend the truth, frown upon vice, and allure men to virtue, assert the cause of religion, and repel the calumnies of infidels, after a manner not to be attempted by others, who yet possess the same piety and zeal with themselves. Their singular talents open a large field of usefulness to them, draw the attention of the public, give them a commanding authority over popular prejudices, and with the blessing of God secure to them no small success in the arduous business of reforming mankind.

The apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, endowed with the gifts of knowledge and utterance, went abroad into all the earth, and brought forth fruit an hundred fold; while private Christians, whom they exhorted to covet earnestly better gifts than these, could do little more, destitute of popular talents, than recommend the holy religion they professed, by their unblameable lives. And since their time, there have been men possessed of extraordinary gifts, who have laboured with uncommon success in the vineyard; while their brethren of inferior abilities, but equal piety, have complained

plained, in the language of the prophet, "Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed *?" To some, the great householder gives ten talents, and to others five; nor does he expect the like returns from the latter, as from the former. He is not a hard master, whatever the slothful servant might pretend, reaping where he has not sowed, and gathering where he has not strawed †.

4. The *different means of religion* that good men enjoy, are another occasion of their different degrees of fruitfulness.

If the gospel is adapted, as we have shewn it is, to promote holiness, and animate men to generous and noble actions, it follows, that the more clearly it is dispensed, the greater abundance of these good effects of it is to be expected. Upon this principle, Christians have the advantage of those, who flourished under the Patriarchal and Jewish dispensations, the present being far preferable, in point of light and glory, to the former. But it is the difference among Christians themselves, we have here chiefly in view. And the difference is considerable, for though the gospel is every where one and the same thing, yet the manner in which it is administered is various. Some seasons and climates, and some modes of cultivation, are more favourable to the fruits of the earth than others. So it is here. God bestows different gifts on different ministers; it seems natural therefore, to expect, in the ordinary course of things, that they who sit under a singularly edifying and animating ministry, should be more exemplary and ornamental in their lives than others. They have the truths of religion set in a more clear and convincing light, and the motives to obedience urged

* Isa. liii. 1,

† Matt. xxv. 16.

ged on them in a more lively and forcible manner than some others ; and therefore ought to excel in the fruits of holiness.

The like also may be observed, of peculiarly striking events of providence, which happen to some Christians. These, with the blessing of God, become the happy means of their growth in grace. What a rapid progress do they make in the divine life, amidst these extraordinary cultivations ! How do they abound in love and good works ! While their fellow Christians, who go on in a smooth path, seldom or ever tried in the furnace of affliction, or emptied from vessel to vessel ; give few distinguishing proofs of flaming zeal for the glory of God, and disinterested benevolence towards mankind. Hence our Lord says, speaking of himself as the vine, and of his Father as the husbandman : “ Every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit * :” plainly intimating, that, as there are degrees of fruitfulness among Christians, so the increase, remarkable in some instances, is owing to the extraordinary measures divine Providence is pleased to take with them.—From hence we are led to observe,

5. That *the comparative different state of religion* in one Christian and another, is the more immediate and direct cause of their different fruitfulness.

It is not our province, as I said before, to enter into mens hearts, to examine what passes there, and comparing their supposed inward tempers and feelings, to pronounce upon their respective characters. But this plain general truth we may affirm, leaving every one to apply it to himself, that, in proportion as religion is on the advance or decline in a man's heart, so will his
external

* John xv. 2.

external conduct be more or less exemplary. If faith, love, and joy, are in lively exercise, there will be correspondent expressions of these tempers in his life. Deeply impressed with the reality of future and eternal things, warmed at his very heart with the love of God in Christ, and sweetly refreshed with a sense of the divine favour; he will be strictly conscientious in all his intercourses with others, temperate in the use of worldly enjoyments, patient under his afflictions, ready to distribute to the wants of others, and vigorous in his endeavours to advance the glory of God, and promote the best interests of mankind.

But if these divine principles are in a weak, sickly, declining state, the torpor that has seized on his mind will affect his external conduct. He will be listless, slothful, and neutral, and though he does not absolutely cease to bring forth fruit, yet the fruit he does bear will be inconsiderable in quantity, and of no very pleasing flavour. This matter is so clear, that I need take no further pains either to explain or prove it. But while we apply this reasoning, with all wholesome severity to ourselves, I must again caution you against the great evil, of too hastily judging of others from external appearances. The good works of some Christians are concealed, by an impenetrable *veil*, from our view. But supposing they really are few, yet if their fewness may be imputed to either of the causes before mentioned, let us not be fond of setting it down to this cause, the most unfavourable of all, namely, an essential defect, in the spirit and power of religion.—To what has been said, I have only to add one other reason of this variety among Christians, and that is,

6. And lastly, *The greater or less effusion of divine influences.*

In regard of husbandry, how much the largeness of the crop depends upon the favourableness of the season, we have had occasion to shew; indeed without the aid of the sun and dew, and the blessing of God, though the ground were ever so well manured and sown, there would be no crop at all. *The Lord blessed Isaac; and so having sowed in the land of the Philistines, he received in the same year an hundred fold* *. In like manner, clear as it is, that every Christian ought to bring forth fruit, it is also evident, that his endeavours will be vain without the divine assistance and blessing. But where more than ordinary fruits are brought forth, as in the instances of some eminent men that might be mentioned; it would be strange if we did not acknowledge, that a more than ordinary measure of the Holy Spirit is poured upon such persons. The noble exploits of an illustrious army of confessors and martyrs, who have contended with principalities and powers, and gained a complete victory over them, are only to be accounted for on this principle. And if their good works are more numerous and brilliant than those of the common class of Christians, if they have brought forth fruit a hundred fold, and these only sixty; the former gratefully ascribe their superiority to the grace of God, while both the one and the other humbly acknowledge, they have not improved their talents to the degree that might be expected.

Thus have we stated the fact, respecting the different degrees of fruitfulness, remarkable among Christians, and considered the true grounds and reasons of it. — It now remains that we represent,

IV. The blessedness of those, who, hearing the word, and keeping it in honest and good hearts, bring forth
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* Gen. xxvi. 12.

the fruits of holiness. This, as we have observed, is implied, though not expressed, in the parable. And if we consider the pleasure that accompanies ingenuous obedience—the evidence which thence arises to the uprightness of the heart—the respect in which a man of this character is held among his fellow Christians—and the rewards he shall hereafter receive at the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall readily pronounce him a happy man.

1. As to the pleasure that accompanies ingenuous obedience.

“Great peace have they,” says David, “who love thy law, and nothing shall offend them*.” And Solomon assures us, that “the ways of wisdom,” that is of holiness, “are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace †.” Much might be said here, of the pleasures of inward religion, the comforts which arise from communion with God, a sense of his favour, and the hope of eternal life. But I have my eye at present, not so much on the contemplative and devotional, as the practical part of religion. And can any one doubt, that a regular attention to duty upon right principles, is accompanied with pleasure? Multitudes indeed shrink back from it. They account time spent in the worship of God, long and tedious; acts of compassion and benevolence, if not of justice, a severe tax upon pleasure and property; and all restraints laid upon their exorbitant passions and appetites, a most intolerable burden. But if they had a taste for communion with the greatest and best of Beings, if they had hearts susceptible of humane and generous feelings, and if they knew the value of temperance and moderation; how would they love the habitation of God’s house,

* Psal. cxix. 165.

† Prov. iii. 17.

house, and the place where his honour dwelleth ! how would they rejoice in doing good to the souls and bodies of their fellow-creatures ! and with what satisfaction and cheerfulness would they daily partake of the bounties of Providence.

Such is the character of the real Christian ; how happy a man therefore must he be ! I mean, when he acts in character ; for it must not be denied, that his heart is sometimes out of tune for devotional exercises, that he is not always alike disposed to benevolent exertions, and that his appetites and passions too often rebel against his prevailing inclinations, though they gain not the absolute mastery over them. And hence all that pain he feels at his heart, and all that sadness which appears on his countenance. It is not his bringing forth fruit that makes him unhappy, but his bringing forth no more fruit, and, in his own modest apprehension, scarce any at all. Holiness and happiness are intimately connected : were that perfect and unmixed, this would be so too. But, though the best obedience the Christian can render, hath no merit in it, and he would reprobate the most distant idea of pleading it at the tribunal of justice ; yet surely it hath its pleasures. Make trial of it, Christian. You have made trial. Tell me then, you who rank among the most unfruitful of Christ's real disciples, whether you have not tasted a sweetness in holy duties, a satisfaction in acts of brotherly-kindness, and a pleasure in the moderate use of worldly enjoyments, that infinitely exceeds all the boasted joys of profane and wicked men ? Would you then be happy ? go and bring forth fruit, do all the good you can, and give God the glory.

2. Fruitfulness affords a noble proof of a man's up-
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rightness,

rightness, and so tends indirectly, as well as directly, to promote his happiness.

With what anxiety does the sincere, but timorous Christian often put the following questions to himself: —“ Am I renewed by the grace of God? Have I ingenuously repented of my sins? Do I truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Is there a spark of real love in my breast to the divine Saviour? And may I venture to reckon myself among the number of his disciples?” Important questions! Our comfort is much concerned in obtaining satisfactory answers to them. But how do we expect to have them answered? There is such a thing as “ God’s Spirit bearing witness with our spirits, that we are the children of God *.” But the asking in a right manner, the testimony of God’s Spirit, implies, the paying a due regard to the testimony of our own spirit. And by what evidence are we to judge of the truth or falsity of this testimony, but that which is laid down in the word of God? And what is that?—It is our bearing fruit. “ Herein is my Father glorified,” says Christ, “ that ye bear much fruit, so shall ye be my disciples,” or so shall ye give proof that ye are my disciples †. “ Hereby we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments,” that is, if we aim to keep his commandments ‡. Again, “ Every one that doeth righteousness is born of God ||.”

And now, if, from a regard to the authority of God, and a sense of our infinite obligations to his grace, we make it our aim to bring forth the fruits of holiness; though these fruits may not be a hundred, or sixty, but only thirty fold; though, through a combination of circumstances,

* Rom. viii. 16.

† John xv. 8.

‡ John ii. 3.

|| John ii. 29.

circumstances, they may be very inconsiderable indeed: yet we possess an authentic testimony, that we are the genuine disciples of Christ. And the knowledge of this tends directly to promote our peace and happiness. But what a further accession of strength does this evidence receive, from that abundance of fruitfulness, which distinguishes some characters from others! An apostle, who brought forth an hundred fold, conscious that he acted from the purest motives, and receiving the immediate testimony of God's Spirit; could not fail of having every doubt respecting his state removed, and so enjoying a full assurance of faith. And how unspeakable must his happiness have been! Who that fears God does not envy him of the sweet peace, the abiding satisfaction, and triumphant joy, he possessed?

Should not this then serve as one motive, among many others, to animate us to love and obedience? And if we are so happy as to arrive at an assurance of hope, that fruitfulness, which may have contributed to clear up our evidence of interest in the favour of God, will not sooth our vanity, but be humbly and thankfully acknowledged to have originated from the seasonable influence and assistance of divine grace. View the Christian, then, walking in the light of God's countenance, and having the joyful testimony of his own conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity he has his conversation in the world; and say, whether he is not of all men the most happy?

3. The esteem, too, in which he is held among his fellow Christians, must contribute not a little to his comfort.

To be honoured and loved by wise and good men, is a great blessing. This blessing we may covet, and if we bring forth fruit we shall enjoy it. The world indeed,

of the whole world. So shall he and they be caught up with the ascending Saviour, to the abodes of bliss above, and there be for ever with the Lord.

And now, all these things laid together, how great is the blessedness of the fruitful Christian! What remains then, but that we take fire at these considerations, and resolve, in a humble dependence on divine grace, that we will endeavour to outdo each other in love and good works! Has our divine Master redeemed us with his precious blood, obtained the Holy Spirit to renew and sanctify us, blessed us with the means of grace, set before us his own perfect example, and given us such exceeding great and precious promises? And shall we content ourselves, after all this expence he has been at for our good, with making him the return of a few cold heartless services, for the promoting his honour and interest in the world? No, Christian! such conduct would be most ungrateful and disingenuous. Let me beseech you then, "my beloved brethren, to be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord*." And as the word of the kingdom is the seed whence fruitfulness is to be expected, let us *receive it with meekness*, remembering that "it is able to save our souls †." And let our Saviour's own exhortation, with the explanation and improvement of which we shall close these discourses, have its due weight with us all, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."

* 1 Cor. xv. 58.

† James i. 21.

DISCOURSE VI.

THE DUTY OF CONSIDERATION EX- PLAINED AND ENFORCED.

MAT. xiii. 9.

Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

IN such manner does our Saviour close the parable of the sower, exhorting his hearers with great earnestness and affection *, to well weigh and consider what he had said. The same phrase occurs in other parts of scripture †; and was well adapted, as here used by our Lord, to convey the following ideas to the minds of the people—that the discourse he had been delivering was parabolical—that the truth veiled under the parable was most important—that their seriously considering it was absolutely necessary to their profiting by it—and that they were not to complain it was unintelligible, for that, if they were not benefited by

* ταυτα λεγων εφωνει—So Luke introduces the text, chap. viii. ver. 8—which words Dr Doddridge thus paraphrases, “*When he had said these things, he cried out with a louder voice than before,*” &c.

† Matt. xi. 15.—xiii. 43. Rev. ii. 7, 11, 17, 29.—iii. 6. 13, 22.—xiii, 9.

by his instructions, the fault would be in the perverseness of their wills, rather than in any defect in their natural or mental powers. Let us briefly elucidate these remarks, before we proceed to the main point in view, which is the explaining and enforcing the great duty of considering the word preached.

1. Our Lord evidently meant, by the language of the text, to remind his hearers, that it was an apologue, fable, or parable, he had been delivering.

This mode of instruction obtained much in ancient times and eastern countries, as we have had occasion to observe before; and it was usual too, either at the beginning or close of the discourse, to intimate as much to the audience. So that our Saviour's audience would have been inexcusable, had they gone away pretending, that all he had been doing was to give them a lecture in husbandry, or to amuse them with an idle tale of sowing and reaping, matters they well enough understood before. Indeed from our Lord's general character and manner of preaching, they might naturally enough presume something more than this was intended: but his saying thus at the close, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear;" or, in other words, remember all this is a parable, was putting the matter beyond a doubt.

2. By this mode of expression they were further reminded, that the several truths veiled under this parable were most interesting and important.

It is as much as if he had said, "Think not I have been trifling with you. No. The instruction just given you is of the last consequence to your present and future welfare. I am a divine teacher. I come to inform your understandings, and do good to your hearts. And be assured, if it is of importance to the
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“preservation of animal life, that your grounds are cultivated and bring forth fruit at the proper season; it is of infinitely greater importance, that your souls are renewed by the grace of God, and that ye are rich in good works.”

3. The direct purport of the exhortation was, to persuade them to consider what they had heard.

“Think not,” as if he had said, “it is enough that ye have heard my words. There is a further duty lying upon you. Recollect my sayings. Meditate upon them. Consider the truths couched under them. Lay them up in your memories and hearts. Endeavour to get the better of your prejudices. Pray to God to open your understandings and change your hearts. And reduce what has been said to practice.” Thus does our Lord teach his hearers the absolute necessity of seriously considering the word, in order to their profiting by it.—Once more.

4. He in effect tells them, that if they were not benefited by what they heard, the fault was rather in their will than their understanding. “Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

Here is a clear distinction observed between the natural and moral powers of the soul, that is, the understanding and judgment on the one part, and the will and affections on the other. As to the former, enervated and broken as our reasoning powers are, men in general cannot pretend that they are absolutely incompetent to consideration. If indeed they were wholly destitute of a capacity of perceiving, comparing, and reflecting; it were as great a folly to reason with them, as it would be to utter articulate sounds in the ear of him who is irrecoverably deaf. How absurd to say to him that has lost the organ of hearing, hear! And how absurd

“to take no thought before hand what they should speak, nor to premeditate, for it should be given them in that hour, what they should speak*.” But who does not see that this was an extraordinary case, and that therefore, for any man to suppose he is justified by this passage in the neglect of premeditation, is not only to reason falsely, but in direct defiance of the apostle’s admonition to Timothy just mentioned, and many others of the like nature? Let us then, my brethren, whose duty it is to instruct others, endeavour to get all the knowledge we can, and be conscientiously laborious in our preparations for the service of the sanctuary. This is the voice of common sense, of Scripture, and of all considerate people who wish to be benefited by our instructions.

2. Care also is to be taken about the manner, as well as the matter of our discourse.

It is beneath the dignity of his character, who brings a message from heaven, and treats with men on subjects of the highest concernment, to use the enticing words of man’s wisdom, or to affect the pompous language of vain rhetoricians. But, while he is careful to avoid a style that is bombast and tumid, and indeed every thing that looks like affectation, he should be cautious how he degenerates into the opposite extreme. Rude and barbarous language, ill-managed metaphors, trite stories, quaint conceits, and a long train of other trifling puerilities, too common among some in our time; not only render the man contemptible who uses them, but have a very pernicious effect upon the generality of hearers. Their judgment is perverted, instead of being informed; their ears are tickled, instead of their hearts being made better; and,

* Mark xiii. 12.

and, to say the best, if they are not disgusted, they are yet only amused. An easy plain natural style, alike remote from pedantry and barbarism, best becomes the authority and importance of divine truth: "sound speech that cannot be condemned*."

Nor is it to edification, for the sake of pleasing a few politer hearers, to throw our discourses into a declamatory essaying form, and affectedly disguise the method we lay down to ourselves. We should ever remember we are speaking to the plainest capacities; and as the arranging our ideas properly is necessary to our being understood, so the giving each division of our discourse its denomination of number, has a happy effect to assist the attention and memory of our hearers.

And then as to voice and action, having taken pains with ourselves to correct what is manifestly improper and disgusting; it may be safely left to nature, and the kind of impulse excited by the subject on which we are treating, to guide us spontaneously in these matters. Clearly understanding what we say, and deeply feeling its truth and importance, our manner will be, not trifling, dull, and formal, but grave, sensible, and enlivening.—Which leads me to observe,

3. That we should look well to our aims and views in discoursing of the great things of God.

The end we propose in any matter, will have a considerable influence on the means we use to attain it. The more interesting our object is, the more assiduous will be our endeavours to compass it. Now the glory of God, and the salvation of immortal souls, are the most noble and important ends we can possibly have in view. The more therefore our minds are occupied with these ideas, and the more deeply our hearts are

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* Tit. ii. 8.

affected with them, the greater pains we shall take to be masters of the subjects we treat of, and to discuss them in such manner as shall be to the edification of those who hear us. Wherefore the preserving a lively sense of religion on our hearts, has a direct tendency to promote both our acceptableness, and our usefulness. Animated by a pure zeal for the honour of Christ and the success of his gospel, we shall study diligently and preach fervently.—To which I have only to add,

4. That our dependence should be firmly placed on the gracious and seasonable influences of the Holy Spirit.

A growing experience of the vital power of religion, and an increasing sense of the difficulty and importance of our work, will not fail to convince us of the need we stand in of superior assistance. That assistance therefore, both in our studies and public ministrations, we should earnestly implore, encouraged by the many gracious promises of God's word to that end. Nor should our views terminate here, but extend to the salutary effect of our instructions upon the hearts of men which is not to be expected without a divine blessing: for were a Paul to plant or an Apollos to water, it would be all in vain, if God gave not the increase.

And now, thus prepared, we have a right, be our audience who they may, to adopt the language of our Master, and with authority to say, "Who hath ears to hear let him hear." Upon the grounds of common sense as well as religion, we may demand their most serious attention. And I have the rather chose to be thus particular on the duty of ministers, as it gives me the better title to that freedom and earnestness which I mean to use in explaining and enforcing *the duty of consideration,*

consideration, to which we now proceed.—And here the first thing we have to recommend is,

FIRST, Some kind of preparation previous to our hearing the word.

If we mean to attend to an argument upon any subject, we should compose ourselves to the business; especially if the subject is important, and the discussion of it likely to take up time. Justice can be done to no argument, if we come not to the consideration of it with minds divested of prejudice and passion, and in a calm self-collected state. This therefore we may reasonably demand of all who attend upon the public preaching of the gospel, even those who may as yet have their doubts of its divine authority. For the question respecting its truth, is and must be acknowledged, by them as well as others, to be important. But the sort of persons I have here chiefly in my eye, are not occasional hearers, or those who now and then out of mere curiosity drop into places of public worship, but those who stately attend the ministry of the word. To you we say, and especially in regard of the day devoted to divine service, *Keep your feet when ye go to the house of God, and be ready, be disposed to hear* *, in a temper of mind suited to the service in which you are to engage.

On the morning of that day, in your retirement, consider seriously with yourself what you are about. Say to yourself—the soliloquy is natural and in all probability will be useful—“ I am going to a place
“ where God is worshipped, and where what is said to
“ be his word is discoursed of. What is the end I
“ propose to myself in going thither? Is it merely to
“ conform to custom, and to oblige my friends and
“ neighbours?”

* Eccles. v. 1.

“ neighbours? Or am I disposed to listen to what the
 “ preacher may say, and to give it that consideration,
 “ which its importance as a message from God (for
 “ that is its claim) demands? Both decency and good
 “ sense teach, that my going to a place of public in-
 “ struction obliges me to pay all due attention to the
 “ speaker. The matter to be discoursed of carries
 “ importance upon the very face of it. It respects
 “ my well-being in this world and in that to come.
 “ I therefore do myself injustice if I enter not coolly
 “ into the argument, and so consider it as to be able
 “ to determine whether the doctrine be true or false,
 “ to be received or rejected. Should the latter upon
 “ good grounds appear to be the case, I shall be justi-
 “ fied in absenting myself for the future from a place
 “ where error and falsehood are propagated, and so
 “ bearing my testimony against it. I shall have done
 “ my duty, and have the satisfaction of acting agree-
 “ able to it. Such conduct will be manly, and approve
 “ itself to God and my own conscience. But, on the
 “ contrary, if I go thither out of custom, or purely
 “ to gratify my curiosity, and pay no other attention to
 “ the business than I would to any idle tale told me in
 “ common discourse, I violate the laws of decency and
 “ good manners: and if what I hear should after all
 “ turn out to be true, my reaping no advantage from
 “ it will be my own fault, and my condemnation ano-
 “ ther day the more tremendous. I will therefore se-
 “ riously consider what I am about. I will endeavour
 “ to thrust from my mind all impertinent thoughts,
 “ and all anxieties about worldly affairs. I will im-
 “ pose silence upon my passions, lay my prejudices under
 “ an interdict, and go to what is called the house of
 “ God

“ God with all the coolness and composure I can command.”

Were you thus to reason with yourself, previous to your entrance on the public duties of the day, and then on your knees humbly and fervently implore the blessing of God on what you are about, you would be likely to receive advantage from the word preached. Resolve therefore to act after this manner *. What I have urged is a dictate of common sense, and whether religion be or be not true, you have no other alternative left you, than either to abandon public worship entirely, or to address yourself to it with the seriousness and self-collection that have been recommended. —The next thing to be considered is,

SECONDLY, How we ought to behave ourselves in the house of God.

At the time agreed on for the public worship, all who mean to join in it should be present. “ Peter and John went up to the temple at the hour of prayer †.” And Cornelius, when Peter entered his house to preach the word to him and his family, thus salutes him, “ Now are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God ‡.” The coming in after the service is begun, is very indecent. It is disturbing both to him who leads the worship, and to those who are engaged in it. But this is not all; it has an ill influence on what follows. Prayer and praise, with which public worship is usually introduced,

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* Here give me leave to recommend, “ Short Meditations on Select Portions of Scripture,” chiefly designed to be read on the morning of this day; by the Rev. Mr Turner of Abingdon. To which are added, “ Considerations on the Custom of visiting on Sunday.”

† Acts iii, 1.

‡ Acts x. 33.

ced, are themselves important branches of duty ; but their utility in connection with preaching is also very considerable. The mind, by a serious and devout attention to these duties, is put into a suitable frame and temper for hearing the word. Having sung the praises of God with elevation of heart, and fervently asked his assistance in attending to what may be spoken, we shall be likely to give the more earnest heed to the things that we hear. He therefore who indecently comes in at a late hour, deprives himself of this natural and proper mean of preparation for what is to follow. Let us then come early to the house of God*.

And need we be told in what manner we should behave ourselves there ? Can it be right to compose ourselves quietly to sleep ? or to be incessantly gazing about on the congregation ? or to be wholly employed in observing the person and watching the attitude and manner of the speaker ? or to suffer our thoughts to wander, like the fool's eye, to the ends of the earth ? He who treats public instruction after this manner, violates the laws of decency and common sense, and defeats all the useful purposes which he would be supposed to have in view, by making one of the audience. His presence says, he came thither to hear ; his behaviour the contrary. How absurd ! My coming to the assembly is a tacit avowal of my intention to listen to the discourse ; that, and that only, ought to occupy my mind. On the tongue of the preacher my ear should hang ; his views I should endeavour to comprehend ; his reasonings I should diligently attend to ; and the thread of his discourse I should closely follow. If pre-
judice

* See Dr Addington's " Serious Address to Christian Worshipers, on the importance of an early attendance upon public worship."

judice arises, it should be opposed. If passion disturbs, it should be suppressed. In short, the service should be begun, proceeded in, and concluded with a regard to God; and with a sincere wish to do justice to the argument, to the speaker, and to myself. A man who thus hears, cannot fail, methinks, of being more or less profited.

But how much the reverse of this is the case in most Christian assemblies, you need not be told. The countenances of too many hearers force upon our minds, a suspicion of their thoughtlessness and inattention, and their conduct afterwards puts the matter beyond a doubt. But can this be right? No certainly. "Who hath ears," then, "to hear, let him hear."—But there is,

THIRDLY, A duty lying upon us after we have heard the word. And upon this you will allow me to be particular, as I apprehend the effect of the word, with the blessing of God, depends chiefly upon it.

Recollection is what I mean, together with self-application and prayer. "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." As if he had said, "I have discoursed to you upon matters of the highest importance. Do not think now the discourse is ended, that the business is all over. Carry away what I have said in your memories. Call it over in your retirements. Consider it in every possible light it can be viewed. Apply it to yourselves. Make it the subject of your conversation with others. Pray mightily to God for his blessing upon it. And frequently advert to it in the course of the week, that so it may have its influence upon your tempers, words, and actions." So the apostle, when he had been exhorting Timothy to
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his duty, adds, "Consider what I say, and the Lord give thee understanding in all things *."

Now the business of *recollection*, if properly attended to, will require resolution, self-denial, and prudence. Give me leave therefore to assist you in it, by recommending the three following expedients—Avoid as much as possible, every thing that may tend to dissipate your mind, and render you incapable of consideration and recollection.—Be not fond of hearing more than you can retain and digest.—Make a point of retiring at the close of the day, for the purpose of recollection and prayer.

I. Avoid as much as possible every thing that may tend to dissipate the mind, and render it incapable of consideration and recollection.

Some will look upon this caution as favouring of pharisaical severity and gloominess, and scarce consistent with that cheerfulness which ought to prevail among Christians, on a day they consider as a festival. Give me leave therefore, before I explain myself, to protest against every thing that looks like grimace in religion, or that tends to beget an unfavourable idea of any of its duties, as if they were hard and rigorous. No. The day we dedicate to divine service ought to be deemed the pleasanter in all the week. And if, "when we fast," we should not "be as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance," much less should we be so on this day. Rather let us "anoint our head and wash our face †," put on our best apparel, look smilingly on all around us, and "eat our meat with gladness and singleness of heart ‡."

But surely there are indulgences which, however allowable at other times, are not compatible with the
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* 2 Tim. ii. 7.

† Mat. vi. 16, 17.

‡ Acts ii. 46.

right discharge of the duties of this day. Drefs we must, but let us not employ so much of the morning in decking our persons, as to preclude the devotion of the closet and the family. Of the bounties of Providence we may cheerfully partake at noon, but what occasion for superfluities? These can scarce be provided, without imposing such services on our domestics, as will deprive them of the religious advantages they have a right to claim, and would otherwise calmly enjoy. The delicacies too of the table, may prove a temptation, and indispose us to that attention which the services of the afternoon demand. A slight repast, therefore, seems the fittest for the intervals of public worship.

And methinks, every sober person must see the great impropriety, not to say indecency, of receiving and returning visits on this day, and indeed of mingling promiscuously with any company but that of our own families. Suppose a man to have listened ever so attentively to the word preached, if the moment he passes out of the assembly, he joins the company of vain, light, dissipated people, whose wish it is to get rid of every serious thought; how is he likely to be profited by what he has heard? Or if the company he falls into are of another cast, it is not improbable his attention may, by a variety of circumstances, be unduly diverted from the solemnities of public worship, in which he had been just engaged. In this way I am persuaded, the salutary effect of impressions received in the house of God hath in a vast many instances been defeated. Is it not better then, to retire calmly to our houses, and there pursue our duty in the manner good sense and our Bibles direct?

2. Be not fond of hearing more than you can retain and digest.

There is such a thing as intemperance, in regard of the mind as well as the body: and if excessive eating may be as hurtful to the constitution as excessive abstinence, it is also true of the mind, that the hearing more than is fit, may be very nearly as injurious as the not hearing at all. A great abundance of instruction poured into the ear, without sufficient intermission for reflection and practice, is extremely prejudicial: it confounds the judgment, overburdens the memory, and so jades the mind as to render it incapable of recollecting afterwards what it had heard, and of calmly deliberating thereon.

Where, indeed, the only object is the gratification of idle curiosity, and persons are more intent on circumstances than things; and where the preacher, instead of reasoning on the great truths of religion, and addressing himself to the consciences of men, spends the whole time in declaiming, allegorizing, or telling tales; a great deal may be heard with little or no fatigue or expence of spirits. But in such case, what real good does a man get? he is amused without being edified. On the contrary, where the true end of attending on divine ordinances is proposed, two sermons a-day, well studied and attentively heard, are, in my opinion, as much as people in common can any way digest and improve. For we ought ever to remember, that our view in hearing the word, should be, not merely to have our passions touched, but chiefly our understandings informed and our hearts made better. Then are we profited by a sermon, when we carry away a clear idea of divine truth, and a firm persuasion of its authority

authority and importance ; and so are upon just grounds awakened, animated, and comforted by it.

Now, how is it possible that he who has given close attention to three or four such useful sermons in a day, should be capable in the evening, if indeed he had time, to do justice to what he has heard ! He will go home, at a late hour, fatigued with the business he has been about, and a mind occupied with a chaos of ideas which he has neither opportunity nor spirits to arrange, digest, and apply to their proper use. And so the pains both of the speaker and hearer prove fruitless. I appeal for the truth of what I say, to reason and experience.

Upon this principle then, I cannot but think it my duty to dissuade those who attend the service of the morning and afternoon, from frequenting lectures in the evening. These exercises doubtless have their use with respect to many who are so circumstanced, as not to be able to attend the former parts of the day, who have no families, or who, if there were no places of public instruction to frequent, would be under a temptation to spend their evening in idleness and dissipation. And in so large and populous a city as this, the establishment of lectures to these purposes, at a convenient distance from each other, is an object deserving of particular attention and encouragement. But to you, Sirs, of the former description, give me leave with all freedom to say, it is your duty, when the afternoon service is closed, to go home calmly and seriously to your families, and see that the worship of God is duly observed there—Which leads me to the last expedient recommended, in order to your deriving real advantage to yourselves from the word preached ; and that is,

3. The making a point of retiring at the close of the day, for the purpose of recollection and prayer.

By *recollection*, I mean the calling over the substance of what we have heard : considering with ourselves the particular point discoursed of, the manner in which it was stated, the reasoning upon it, its agreement with scripture and our own experience, and the uses to which it was applied. This seriously done, and followed with fervent prayer to God for his blessing, we may hope the great truths of religion will be deeply rivetted in our minds, make an abiding impression upon our hearts, and have a mighty influence upon our tempers and practice.

Prudence will direct how we are to proceed in these meditations, what time is to be employed therein, and what assistance we may receive by discoursing with our family upon these matters. But in general, the duty itself is so reasonable and useful, that it should on no account be wholly dispensed with. As to time, there can be no want of opportunity, if you make a point of avoiding company, and securing the evening to yourself. As to composing your mind to meditation, that may sometimes be difficult, but it will not always be so, and use will make it more and more easy. And as to memory, though it be not so retentive as you could wish, the inuring yourself to the practice we are recommending will assist your memory : and then you are to remember, it is not words you are to recollect, but things.

And now I ask, whether this business we are exhorting you to, does not approve itself to your judgment and good sense, as most fit and necessary. When a friend has discoursed with you upon any interesting matter, respecting your temporal affairs, do not your
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thoughts naturally turn upon the subject when you and he are parted? Why then should you wish to get rid of all recollection, when you have been voluntarily spending an hour or two in hearing subjects discussed, which are confessedly of infinitely greater importance? Such conduct is disingenuous, foolish, and pernicious. It is a very unkind return to those who have been labouring, weeping, and praying for your good. It is acting after a manner which common sense, if its plain dictates were consulted, would condemn. And it tends directly to the depriving you of the greatest good, and the bringing guilt and misery upon your conscience. But I forbear at present to urge this, or any other branch of the duty recommended, upon you. Our business hitherto has been only to lay your duty before you: in the next sermon we are to enforce it.

PART II.

By the exhortation in our text, “Who hath ears to hear, let him hear;” our Saviour meant to remind his audience, that it was a parable he had been speaking—that the truth veiled under it was most important—that their seriously considering it, was absolutely necessary to their profiting by it—and that, if they were not benefited by his instructions, the fault would be in the perverseness of their wills, rather than in the weakness of their natural powers, or any obscurity in the form of speech he had adopted. These things considered, we have proceeded to the object of this discourse, which is—to represent the duty which men owe to the word they hear—and to enforce it with suitable motives.

The first of these was dispatched in the former sermon. Here we set out with speaking of the duty of those who preach. They ought to consider well what they say, otherwise they cannot with reason expect the attention of their audience, nor with decency require it. Now if we, Sirs, whose province it is to address you, are conscientious in our preparations for public work, deliver ourselves with a plainness and solemnity suited to the importance of our subject, aim at the glory of God and your good, and have our eye directed to a divine influence for success; if we, I say, thus preach, we may surely, without the charge of arrogance, demand your most serious attention. This duty therefore, on your part, we have proceeded to explain, shewing you—what kind of preparation is expedient, previous to your hearing the word—how you ought to behave during your attendance upon it—and the duty that lies upon you after the service is concluded—And now we go on, as was proposed,

II. To enforce what has been said with suitable motives. And our first argument shall be taken,

FIRST, From the decency and fitness of the thing itself.

Good manners is of great importance in society, and there is no one precept held in more general respect among civilized people, than that of paying attention to those who speak to us. If, indeed, a man means to affront me, I am justified in turning away from him. But in all other cases such conduct is illiberal. It were unworthy of a prince to shut his ear against the meanest of his subjects whom he admits into his presence; and it would be deemed rude behaviour to treat a stranger after this manner who asks us a question as we pass the streets. But it is the height

height of indecency to suffer ourselves to be addressed in a set discourse, by a person of character, and whom we are acquainted with; and to give no heed at all to what he says.

Such is the case here. It is the duty of ministers to discourse to us from week to week of the great things of God, we regularly attend upon their ministrations, they are men of character and no strangers to us; and yet, instead of well weighing their discourses, we treat them with indifference and neglect. Is this right? Is this decent? To seem to hear and not to hear, is to act conformably neither to truth nor to good manners. And how can such conduct be justified upon the common principles of prudence and decorum, setting aside all regard to religion? If therefore you would stand well in the opinion of your neighbours, as men of sense and good breeding, be persuaded to hear us: if not, go on in your old way, and be content to rank with a rude illiterate peasant, who treats the laboured discourse of a friend on some useful subject of civil life with stupid contempt.—To proceed,

SECONDLY, Let me remind you of the particular obligations you owe to those whose ministrations you attend.

This is an argument addressed to ingenuity and gratitude. Suppose a friend apprehending some imminent danger likely to befall me, were to be at great pains to inform me of it, to entreat me with tears to take the necessary measures to escape it, and to offer me all the assistance in his power; should I not be much obliged to him, and ought I not to give him an attentive hearing? On the contrary, were I not only to forbear thanking him, but to turn away from him with

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cold indifference; would not such conduct be disingenuous as well as preposterous? Would not the feelings of my friend be greatly hurt, and all about me condemn my folly? Nor would it be a sufficient apology for such strange neglect, that I had my doubts of the truth of the story: for however that might be, his good-will would be just the same.

Now, such is precisely the case here. Ministers warn us of the greatest dangers, and hold up to our view the most glorious prospects; with tears entreat us to flee from the wrath to come, and to lay hold on the hope set before us; offer us every assistance in their power, study, pray, and preach, to save our souls and make us happy. And what is the effect of their endeavours? We hear them; but do we take pains to understand them? Do we lay up the word in our memories, consider of it afterwards, and pray earnestly to God for his blessing upon it? No. On the contrary, like those in the parable, we “make light of it, and go our way, one to his farm, and the other to his merchandize* ;” proceed from week to week in the old beaten tract, of hearing and forgetting what we hear, frequenting the house of God and pursuing the world.

Now, I ask, is not such conduct both foolish and disingenuous? Certainly it is. Nor can you, Sirs, excuse it upon any other grounds than will fix an imputation upon your understanding, or your integrity, or both. For if you conceive of your ministers as weak and credulous, or as self-interested and designing men; the question will return, why then do you attend their ministrations? Your hearing them, and going on to hear them, lays you under an obligation to

* Matt. xxii. 5.

to them, from which nothing can discharge you, but that serious consideration of what they say, which we are so warmly recommending.

Let us, however, spend a moment upon the two excuses just glanced at. Are these men weak and credulous? Possibly some of them may. Yet we will venture to affirm, that in general they possess as good a share of understanding as others. It is acknowledged, indeed, that shining wit, profound sense, and great literary attainments, are not necessary to qualify men to preach the gospel. "God has," sometimes, "chosen the foolish things of the world, to confound the wise; and the weak things of the world, to confound the things which are mighty*." A plain man may clearly state, ably defend, and warmly enforce the great truths of religion. And a failure in point of accuracy and judgment, is no reason why you should not consider what is said, since the gospel is substantially the same. And after all, be the abilities of the speaker more or less distinguished, your presence, and especially your stated attendance on his ministry, gives him an unquestionable right, as we observed before, to demand your serious attention.

The other excuse is such as no man of a liberal mind would admit, unless compelled to it by the clearest evidence. And in that case, he would rather withdraw himself from the instruction of one whose views he had just cause to suspect, than urge his unfavourable opinion of him, as a reason for not duly attending to his admonitions. But common charity will oblige men to conclude, that those who discourse to them of the great things of God, sincerely mean to promote their good. And whoever considers the temporal

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* 1 Cor. i. 27.

advantages which many of this character forego, and the various inconveniences and trials to which they expose themselves in the exercise of their ministry, will allow that the presumption is strongly in their favour.

It is admitted then, that they who preach the word of the kingdom, have your good, Sirs, at heart. And may not an argument be drawn from hence, to persuade you to consider seriously what they say? Can you refuse them a request so reasonable in itself, and which will infinitely gratify them, without the possibility of doing you any harm? Let the message they bring stand how it will at present in your mind, it is, in their apprehension, most true and important; and so far you give them credit. Can you wonder then, that seeing you in danger of perishing for ever, they are eager to pluck you as brands out of the burning? and that, perceiving an infinite good in prospect, they ardently wish you to become possessed of it? Will you call this wish, this desire, this impulse of theirs, by any other name than good-will? Ought it not to attach them to you, and to draw forth correspondent affections in your breasts towards them? Will you take no account of their pains and labours, their struggles and conflicts, their tears and temptations? Shall they exert all their powers in the study of God's word, to possess you of the rich treasure it contains? Shall they pour out their cries to Heaven day and night for you? Shall they travail in birth of you, till Christ is formed in you? Shall they, as his ambassadors, and in his stead, beseech you to be reconciled to God? Shall they, in a word, by all that is dear to them and you, entreat you to consider the things that belong to your everlasting peace?—And can you after all receive
their

their message with cold indifference; forget it as soon as you have heard it; wish them, like those bidden to the marriage-feast, to have you excused to the master of it, and send them back to him with this sad complaint, "Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" God forbid! O consider the pain this will give their hearts! And consider too; on the contrary, the joy they will feel, should your conduct be the reverse of what has been represented! No external token of respect can they possibly receive from you, that is to be mentioned at the same time with this—This, this is the reward of their ministry.—Again,

THIRDLY, It is to be remembered, that preaching is a divine institution; and that they who are called to dispense the gospel, have, by virtue of that call, a claim to the attention of those to whom they are sent.

I am sensible too many artful men have taken advantage of this idea to impose upon the credulity of mankind, and so to obtrude upon the world, opinions of a pernicious tendency, both to the civil and religious interests of society. And too many, it must be added, under the character of Christian ministers, have challenged a kind of reverence from the ignorant multitude, to which they have no title, and without any view, it is to be feared, to promote what ought to be the grand object of their ministry. They have talked loudly of the dignity of the priesthood, of indelible character, and of I know not what occult quality annexed to their office, and the manner of their admission to it, independent of personal character. But these pretensions every faithful minister of Christ will reject with contempt, as no better than so many charms or spells, to enslave mankind to a sort of spiritual do-
minion,

minion, founded neither in reason nor the word of God. The position, however, just laid down, is capable of full and satisfactory proof.

If we will regard the authority of Scripture, preaching is a divine institution, and is to continue in the world to the end of time. When our Saviour ascended up into heaven, he commissioned his disciples to “teach all nations *,” and “to go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature † :” and the promise annexed, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world ‡,” clearly shews that the commission was to extend to Christian ministers of every age and country. The phrase, of “the end of the world,” could not mean here, as it sometimes does, the end of the Jewish dispensation, for the persons to whom the gospel was to be preached, were of the remotest countries—“every creature.” It is plain therefore, he meant to say, that preaching was to be received and acknowledged as his appointment; and that it should be succeeded, through his influence and blessing, to the latest times.

The apostle holds the same language, when he tells us, that “it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe || ;” and when he thus reasons with the Romans, “How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they are sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! So then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by

* Matt. xxviii. 19.

† Mark xvi. 15.

‡ Matt. xxviii. 20.

|| 1 Cor. i. 21.

By the word of God *." Agreeable to this we are commanded *not to despise prophesyings*, that is, preaching †; and *to receive* those who come *in the name of Christ*, with a regard suitable to the authority that sends them, and the importance of the message they bring †. And so there are many expressions of God's displeasure against those, who contemptuously refuse them that speak in his name; and many promises of his favour and blessing to those who receive the word gladly, and search the Scriptures to see whether these things are so.

As to the question, how may we know who are *called of God* to preach the gospel? it will be a sufficient reply to it here, without entering into particulars which would carry us too far; that every man's reason, if he will make proper use of it, consulting at the same time his Bible, will enable him to discover pretty clearly who are not called of God: and it may and ought to be presumed of the rest, that he has raised them up and sent them. No one in his senses can suppose, that men who have not the powers of utterance; who are grossly ignorant; who live ill lives; who are manifest perverters of the gospel; who, weary of their callings, thrust themselves into the ministry against the opinion of wise and sober men, and the Christian societies to which they belong; or who have no reasonable prospect of exercising their ministry to edification: I say, it is not imaginable that such men are called of God. But those of the contrary description ought, in the judgment of charity, to be so considered and received, be the forms of their admission to this sacred office what they may.

And

* Rom. x. 14, 15, 17.

† 1 Thess. v. 20.

‡ See Matt. x. 40. Mark ix. 37,—41. John xiii. 20.

And now, surely an argument may be drawn from their *calling*, to persuade men to the serious consideration of the business on which ministers are sent. Though they are not vested with miraculous powers, nor exempted from the common frailties of humanity, they are yet as truly sent by God as were the prophets and apostles: and if by magnifying their office they may rouse the attention of their hearers, and so be the instruments of saving their souls, their using this freedom is not only allowable but commendable. Yes, Sirs, we will magnify our office, if by any means we may provoke you to emulation. We will presume to tell you that we are sent of God, if that will gain your ear—if that will fix your attention. In the name of God then! and as ye will answer it at his dread tribunal! we command you to hear us—we require you to consider the message we are charged with.—O be persuaded!—But if ye will obstinately refuse, we can do no other than go back to him who sent us, and report your refusal. So we will do. Look ye to the consequence. If ye will perish—sad thought!—we—we must be to you a favour of death unto death.—But let us now go on to argue the point,

FOURTHLY, From the momentous nature of the business itself on which we are sent to you.

It is upon no trifling concern, no matter of doubtful import, we address you. The message we have to deliver is of the highest importance, and supported by the fullest evidence. In the civil affairs of life, *Truth* and *Importance* always give energy to a discourse. I am infinitely more affected with an argument that comes home to my property, person, and reputation; than with the curious speculations of a philosopher, the warm reasoning of a politician, or the amusing talk of

an-historian. I shall not be a moment determining which shall have my ear, he who comes to tell me of an estate that is fallen to me, or he who wishes to divert me with an idle dream. But the competition in this case is infinitely less, than that between the most weighty concern of the present life, and the salvation of an immortal soul.

Religion carries upon the very face of it an *importance*, not to be fully estimated by any human measures. It has for its object a being of immense perfection, and for the seat of its residence, a soul formed for immortality. It holds up to our view an infinite variety of truths, the most instructive and interesting. It possesses our minds of ideas, the most august and marvellous. It relieves our consciences of the bitterest pains, and pours into our bosoms the most refined joys. It makes a revolution in the soul, converts lions into lambs, and raises men from a state of abject wretchedness to the highest pitch of honour and happiness. It extends its influence through all the concerns of life, the vale of death, and an endless duration hereafter. It brings near to the eye of faith, the invisible realities of an eternal world, the joys of heaven and the torments of hell, the last judgment, the burning elements, the dissolving world, the general wreck of universal nature.

Would you frame an idea of the *importance* of religion?—Listen to the dying groans of the incorrigible sinner—fix your eye on the placid countenance of the expiring Christian—hear the triumphant shouts of an army of martyrs, passing through the flames of persecution to the joys of heaven—descend into the prison of hell, and take a view of the gloomy mansions of the damned—rise thence to the abodes of bliss above, and
mingle

minge with the general assembly and church of the first-born—What shall I say?—go to mount Calvary, and behold the Creator of the world expiring on a cross, to give existence to religion in the heart of man. Amid these scenes, every thing accounted great among mortals vanishes into nothing—expires like a taper in the full blaze of the sun. States, kingdoms, and empires disappear; the glory of the world passes away. And on the other hand, the heaviest load of evils under which the Christian groans, becomes light and momentary.—And now, if these are the matters on which we discourse to you, are they not of all others the most important? Should you not then give earnest heed to the things you hear.

But you will perhaps say, “ Important as these matters may seem, if there is no *truth* in them, and they are only the reveries of a heated imagination; I am justified in paying no attention to them.” True, you are. But then you ought to be well assured of your premises, before you draw your conclusion. On the contrary, you cannot but own it is possible these things may be true; yea, sometimes they strike you as highly probable. But we affirm that they are true, and bring positive proof in support of our affirmation. We tell you, there verily is a reward for the righteous, and a God that judgeth in the earth; and that we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we appeal for the truth of what we thus affirm, to the testimony of the most authentic records; to a series of miracles that cannot be rejected, without admitting facts more difficult to be credited than these miracles themselves; to a long train of prophecies, some of which

which have been fulfilled, and others are now fulfilling before your eyes; to the purity and sublimity of the Christian doctrine; to the wonderful effects it has produced in the hearts and lives of men; to its progress in the world, amidst the powerful and persevering opposition it has met with from passion, pride, and prejudice; and to the consent of the wisest and best men that have flourished on our earth, and who, many thousands of them, have sealed their faith with their blood.

And will you, amidst all this evidence, dispute the truth of these things? Yea, more than this, will you confidently assert, that there is not the appearance of *truth* in them? For so much you must assert, before you can account with consistency for that inattention, from which we are so earnestly dissuading you. What horrid perverseness this! Shall we take you to the foot of mount Sinai, and shew you the great God descending thereon, in fire, and blackness, and darkness, and tempest? Shall we lead you from thence to the sepulchre of the crucified Jesus, and present him to your view rising from his grave, and passing up through the clouds into heaven? And will you pronounce religion a cunningly devised fable? How determined such prejudice! How inveterate such enmity!

But perhaps you, Sirs, hold another kind of language. Like Gallio the Roman deputy, you care for none of these things, nor are you anxious to find an excuse for your indifference. We tell you of a heaven and a hell, of death and judgment, of a Saviour and the great things he has done, of religion and the blessings it proposes, of a soul and all it is capable of enjoying and suffering; and you coolly reply, "It may be so for aught we know: we hear you, but will

“give ourselves no further trouble about it.” What stupid infatuation! Surely such conduct, if persisted in, cannot fail of bringing down the vengeance of almighty God on your devoted heads.

Hear the reasoning of the apostle upon this subject, when exhorting men to the great duty we are now enforcing. “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will *!”—Thus you see the importance of the things delivered, is an argument to engage our attention to them: as is also,

FIFTHLY, The necessity of consideration in order to our profiting by the word.

A discourse that is not understood, believed, and felt, can do a man no good: it will neither guide his judgment, influence his temper, or govern his conduct. And whatever benefit we do receive from a discourse, it will be proportioned to the clearness of our perceptions, the strength of our faith, and the liveliness of our feelings. Let the matters, therefore, on which ministers treat, be ever so momentous, if we affix no ideas to them, and so are neither persuaded of their reality, nor affected with their importance, we cannot be edified. But how are we to understand, believe, and feel; without hearing, reflecting, and considering?

It

* Heb. ii. 1,—4.

It hath been said, indeed, that some persons have been converted by a single word : and in such instances, it may seem at first view, as if there could be little, if any consideration. But this is a mistake. The word, (suppose *eternity*), which, with the blessing of God, proved the mean of the man's conversion, did not operate as a spell or charm ; it did not produce a change in his mind he could not tell how or wherefor. No. The truth is, his attention was fixed to the sentiment couched under the word ; and so impressions were made on his heart, which, after a course of reasoning, issued in its conversion. It is then by attending, thinking, and considering, that men are converted. God deals with us as reasonable creatures. No new faculties are given us. The order of nature is not reversed. We are not required to understand without thinking, to believe without considering, or to feel without receiving impression. Of what importance then is the duty we are recommending ! “ Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

Nor does the doctrine of divine influences at all militate against this duty : on the contrary, it is a great incentive to it. While you are hanging upon the lips of the preacher, following him from sentence to sentence, and endeavouring to comprehend his meaning, who knows but divine light may spring up in your minds, and a new bias be given to your will ? “ Faith comes by hearing * ;” and while Lydia was thus employed, “ the Lord opened her heart to attend to the things spoken by Paul †.” While you are calling over what you have heard, examining yourselves by it, and searching the Scriptures to see whether these things are so ; who knows but *God may give you understanding,*

* Rom. x. 17.

† Acts xvi. 14.

ing *, *circumcise your heart to love him †*, and *incline you to his testimonies ‡* ?

The same obligation that lies upon us to discourse to you of the great things of religion, lies upon you to consider them. It is our duty, assured that *God will judge the world, to command all men every where to repent ||* : knowing the terror of the Lord, to persuade them § : and, having the word of reconciliation committed to us, to beseech them in Christ's stead to be reconciled unto God ¶. We cannot, indeed, command success. But shall we therefore forbear the discharge of our duty ? That would be most unreasonable and disingenuous. No : Animated by this divine doctrine of the influence of the Holy Spirit, we will apply ourselves with the greater ardour to our work. In like manner, it is your duty to hear, consider, read, and pray. A superior power, however, is necessary to renew your heart. But will you therefore neglect your duty ? That would be unreasonable and disingenuous. No : Rather let this divine doctrine become an argument to quicken you, as well as us, with redoubled vigour to your duty. Consider what we say, and the Lord give you understanding.—But it should be further remembered, that as without attention and consideration, there is no profiting by the word ; so,

SIXTHLY, There are many obstructions in the way of this duty, the recollection of which ought to have the force of an argument to excite and animate us to it.

What these obstructions are we have shewn you. Our Lord represents them in a very striking manner in the parable we have been explaining. He tells us
that

* 2 Tim. ii. 7. † Deut. xxx. 6. ‡ Psal. cxix. 36.

|| Acts xvii. 30, 31. § 2 Cor. v. 11. ¶ 2 Cor. v. 19, 20.

that Satan, sin, and the world, exert their utmost powers to prevent the natural and proper operation of the word on the heart : and this their purpose they effect, by dissuading men from a calm and serious attention to it. *Satan, the wicked one, comes and catches away the word as soon as it is sown, that they may not believe and be saved.* He endeavours to divert their thoughts from it while they are hearing it, or to excite prejudices in their breasts against it, or to hinder their recollection of it afterwards. What a subtle malicious adversary this ! The *heart* too is indisposed to receive the word. It is hard and unyielding, like *stony or rocky ground.* The understanding admits not easily the light of divine truth ; the will is not without great difficulty subjected to it ; and the passions, carried away by an unnatural and violent impulse, prevent the due operation of the word on the judgment and conscience, and so defeat the salutary end for which it is preached. Men *receive the word with gladness ; but having no root in themselves, they endure only for a time ;* afterward, *when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, they are offended.* And then the *world* is a great hinderance to the success of the word. As the *thorns springing up with the seed choke it, so the cares, riches, and pleasures of the world, choke the word, and the man becomes unfruitful.* His time is so taken up with the affairs of life, that he has not leisure for meditation. His heart is so oppressed with anxious cares, or so elated with the hope of gain, or so fascinated with sensual gratifications, that he knows not how to compose his mind to consideration. And the more deeply he enters into the spirit of the world, the more is his aversion to religion confirmed. So that “ it is easier for a camel to

pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man," that is, a man who makes the world his object, "to enter into the kingdom of God *."

Now, taking all these circumstances into view, and at the same time remembering what was just said of the infinite importance of religion; we possess a further powerful motive to consideration. The inattention of Archimedes to his personal safety, at the sacking of the famous city of Syracuse, was truly wonderful. So intent was he upon demonstrating his problem, that when the Roman soldiers entered his study, with a demand on his life, all the favour he had to ask of them was, that he might not be disturbed till he had finished the business he was about. Strange! Self-preservation, one would have thought, should have taken the precedence of every other consideration: and of consequence taught him, before the fatal moment arrived, to dismiss his studies, and take the proper measures for his escape. And is it not equally wonderful, that men should not feel the force of the motive we are now urging, in concurrence with that of the importance of religion; to provoke them to consideration?

If a man knew his house to be on fire, would he suffer his attention to be diverted from so alarming a circumstance by the amusements of the family, or the business of the accounting-house? No. His danger would so wholly occupy his mind, as to thrust every other concern from his view, and rouse him into immediate action. And shall we, Sirs, whose life, whose happiness, whose all is at stake; suffer ourselves to be lulled into a fatal security by the machinations of Satan, the deceitful reasonings of our own hearts, and the vain allurements of the world? On the contrary, should
not

* Mark x. 25.

not the insidious attempts of these enemies, rouse our indignation, and their open assaults animate us to every possible exertion? What! shall the wicked one, like a bird of prey, watch his opportunity to catch away the good seed as soon as it falls on the ground; and we know it, and yet not be on our guard? Shall he go about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; and we see him approaching, and yet make no resistance*? Shall he have great wrath, because he knoweth his time is short†; and we none to oppose him, though we know our time is equally short? Shall he be ever plotting how to carry his malevolent designs into execution, and we be stupidly thoughtless and inconsiderate? Can such a base kind of cowardice as this consist with the character of men of sense and spirit? Let us take example of him, and if opposition creates watchfulness and attention on his part, let it have the same effect on ours.

This reasoning will likewise apply to all the other obstructions to consideration of which we have so largely discoursed, I mean those arising from irregular passions, in combination with worldly cares and pleasures. The more loud and clamorous these disturbers of our devotion are, the more vigorous and spirited should be our resistance to their solicitations. Reflect then, we beseech you, when going to the house of God, while there, and as you are coming from thence, on this formidable confederacy among your enemies, to prevent your acquiring the most inestimable gain, and to secure your final condemnation; and let this alarming reflection rouse your attention.

SEVENTHLY, The authority that enjoins this duty upon us, adds infinite weight to all that has been said.

To

* 1 Pet. v. 8.

† Rev. xii. 12.

To attend diligently to the reasonings and persuasions of those who publish the gospel in our ears, is the solemn command of the great God; of him who is above all, fills all, and is the end of all things; who made us, made us reasonable creatures, and will call us to an account for the use of our reason; who has heaven and earth at his disposal, and is at no loss for means to punish those who dispute his authority, and to reward those who diligently seek him; who in short can instantly blot us out of existence, or sink us into an abyss of endless misery. What an immense Being this! Can we think of him, and not shudder at the idea of wilful disobedience to his commands?

He hath signified his will to us, by the light of nature, by the holy Scriptures, and by the ministers of his gospel. Reason is the voice of God. It was given us to direct our conduct, and though enfeebled by human apostasy, it clearly teaches us our obligations to this great duty of consideration. The Scriptures too are the voice of God, and they enjoin this duty on us with the greatest earnestness and solemnity. *I have set watchmen over you, hearken to the sound of the trumpet* *. *Believe the prophets, and ye shall prosper* †. *Hearken diligently—Hear, and your soul shall live* ‡. *Give earnest heed to the things ye hear* ||. *Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.* It were endless to cite passages of this sort, with which the Scriptures every where abound. And then the voice of ministers, if agreeable to the Bible, is the voice of God: so that, as Christ says, “if we hear them, we hear him: and if we despise them, we despise him §.” And how

* Jer. vi. 17.

† 2 Chron. xx. 20.

‡ Isa. lv. 2, 3.

|| Heb. ii. 1.

§ Luke x. 16.

how earnestly they beseech us to consider what they say, you need not be again told.

Can it then be doubted whether that consideration we have been exhorting you to, is a duty enjoined upon you by the great God? It is his command; and will you pay no attention to it? When God spake these solemn words from Mount Sinai, *Hear, O Israel!* think you the wretch who should have dared to say, *I will not hear*, would have escaped instant punishment? No. The hands of the whole congregation would have been upon him; no eye would have pitied him. Nor can you with reason plead in excuse for your inattention, that God does not now speak to us, as he did then, with an audible voice from heaven. For if the manner in which he communicates his will to you under the present dispensation, is more mild and gentle than under the former; if the small still voice of the gospel is better adapted to allure you to consideration, than that of an angel, or one just risen from the dead; and if you have sufficient evidence of its divine authority, yea, the full complement of external evidence arising from the union of the Mosaic and Christian institutions; it will follow, that your guilt, instead of being extenuated, is in no small degree aggravated. *How then will you escape who neglect this great salvation *?* No excuse can be framed for your disobedience. It is rebellion, wilful rebellion, the utmost effort of rebellion. To say you will not obey this or that command of God, is horrid insolence; but to say you will not give him the hearing, is at once to violate all his commands, and to offer him the highest possible indignity. What punishment does not such conduct deserve? And can you wonder, persisting in your

* Heb. ii. 3.

your obstinacy, that the fierce wrath of almighty God should smother against you ?

Hear the sentence of his word ; it hath gone out of his lips, and will speedily be executed. “ Every soul which will not hear, shall be destroyed from among the people *.” “ They refused to hear my words, therefore, behold, I will bring evil upon them, which they shall not be able to escape †.” “ Whosoever,” says Christ to his ministers, “ shall not receive you, and hear your words ; it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for them ‡.” “ The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven, with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, to take vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ ||.” What an awful day will that be ! And can you lay your hands on your hearts, and say, that the language of the blessed God to such obstinate sinners in their extremity, is unjust ? “ Because I have called, and ye refused, I have stretched out my hand and no man regarded ; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof : I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh : When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind ; when distress and anguish cometh upon you §.”—But I have one argument more to add, and that is taken,

EIGHTHLY, and lastly, From the advantage to be expected from consideration.

That men are averse to this duty, the language of the text supposes ; and it is a fact too notorious to be disputed. But upon what principles are they averse

* Acts. iii. 23. † Jer. xi. 10. 11. ‡ Matt. x. 14, 15.

|| 2 Theff. i. 7, 8. § Prov. i. 24, —27.

to it? Let us meet your prejudices, Sirs, and endeavour to obviate them.—Is the business, in the first place, *impracticable*? Do we require you to stop the tide, to tear up mountains from their foundations, to pluck the sun from his orb, or reverse the order of nature? No. We ask nothing of you, but what may be done, what others have done, and what you yourselves are capable of doing.

“ But, it is a difficult, painful, laborious kind of business.” Say you so? Where is the mighty difficulty of listening to a plain discourse, carrying away the leading ideas of it in your memory, comparing them with the dictates of conscience and scripture, and then going down on your knees, and begging God that what you have heard may do you good? Where is the hardship of all this? You can reason and strive to get this world; and pray why cannot you use the same endeavours about another? You think not much of spending hours in the pursuit of wealth, and at your pleasures; and why must it be deemed an herculean labour, to fix your attention for one hour to a sermon, and to retire afterwards half an hour to obtain satisfaction, whether what you have heard is true or false, of moment or of no account at all? If men will make mountains of mole-hills, be afraid of their own shadows, and consider every little exertion as hazardous to their existence; there is an end, not only to all great exploits, but to the common businesses of life. Rouse then from your sloth, put on resolution, and set about the duty we are recommending.

“ But,” say you, “ the result of consideration will, I fear, be unfavourable to me.” So then you think consideration will do you harm.—Strange! If that were the case, we ought to dissuade you from it. But
would

would you be pleased, were we to wish you to take what we say for granted, without giving yourself the trouble to enquire into it? You would not. Why then should you be angry with us for pressing that upon you, the contrary of which would reflect a dishonour upon your understanding?—"But you may chance to be persuaded of things you do not wish to believe." Aye, that's the matter. Here lies the grand difficulty. But how unmanly this excuse! Truth is truth, whether you do or not believe it. If upon enquiry you become fully satisfied that religion is an empty dream, the event will be to your wish, and you will go on sinning with greater ease to yourself than ever. If, on the contrary, it should prove to be true, the knowledge and persuasion of this great truth, however unwelcome to you, may in the end be of infinite advantage. To urge men to the consideration of dangers which there is no possibility of escaping, would be cruel. But that is not the case here. Though it should turn out that you are a miserable sinner, in danger of suffering the wrath of God, and without any help in yourself; yet your case is not desperate, there is help in the gospel. The same motive therefore that induces us to hold up these painful truths to your view, should induce you to consider them. But be the event how it may, it is a reflection on your understanding and resolution to refuse to consider a question, for fear the reply to it should not be agreeable. And indeed, this excuse of yours is a presumptive argument that religion is true, or at least that you have your apprehensions after all that it is not a delusion.

But you go on to object, "If I listen to your advice, and become a convert to religion, I must renounce habits I have contracted, break off my gay acquaintance,

“acquaintance, and give up all my future worldly
“prospects; and on the contrary, must be content to
“spend the remainder of my life in sadness and for-
“row, deferring all hope of happiness to a future state.”

But if the matter were as you have stated it, admitting there is a heaven for the righteous and a hell for the wicked; you are not justified in conceiving of religion with horror, and starting back from consideration as an exercise utterly inimical to your real interests. If the habits you have contracted are evil, ought they not to be renounced? If the company you associate with are dangerous, should they not be shunned? If the eager pursuit of worldly gain and pleasure will inevitably involve you in misery, should not such pursuits be discontinued? And even though the remainder of your life were to be spent in self-denial and affliction, you would have no cause, with the hope of heaven before you, to regret the exchange you had made of the service of sin for that of God and religion. It is our interest to submit patiently to the severest discipline inflicted in the school of wisdom, if thereby we may be prepared for the exalted joys and services to which we are to be admitted when at man's estate.

But the truth is, if the event of your attention and consideration should be, what you at present dread, your conversion from sin to God; you will be a gainer in the highest degree, not in the future world only, but in the present. The pleasures resulting from peace of conscience, communion with God, the hope of heaven, the exercise of the Christian temper, and the practice of all those duties our divine Master has enjoined; the pleasures, I say, resulting hence, are infinitely preferable to those which the gratification of our irregular appetites in their utmost extent can possibly afford. And

O! what heart can frame a conception of one thousandth part of the bliss which awaits the Christian in the future world! But I forbear enlarging here, and refer you to the account given in the former discourse, of the blessedness of those whose hearts having been made honest and good, hear the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

I have only to add, before I dismiss the present argument, that as the duty of consideration is every where enjoined in the book of God, so it is enforced by the most powerful motives and encouraging promises. Time would fail me were I to recite them. It shall suffice to comprise them all in the expressive words of Isaiah the evangelical prophet, and Paul the great apostle of the Gentiles. "Hear, and your souls shall live *," says the former; "Consider what I say, and the Lord give you understanding in all things †," is the language of the latter.

And now to close the whole. "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." Such is the language of reason, conscience, ministers, the holy Scriptures, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And shall the united voice of these your best friends be rejected? Shall an exhortation most reasonable in itself, and addressed to you with the greatest earnestness, affection and solemnity, be treated with contempt? Have you no regard to decency and good manners?—no sense of personal obligation to those who wish you well, and with tears beseech you to do justice to yourselves?—no conviction that what is required of you is just and prudent?—no presumption in your breasts that preaching may possibly be a divine institution?—no apprehension that the matters you are exhorted to consider and enquire into

* Isa. lv. 3.

† 2 Tim. ii. 7.

into, may possibly be true and of the highest moment?—no discernment that the considering them is necessary to your pronouncing definitively on them?—no jealousy of your own hearts, that they may deceive you; of the world, that it may impose upon you; and of the powers of darkness, that they may be plotting your ruin?—no wish to approve yourselves to Almighty God, no dread of his displeasure?—no sense of the horrid baseness and ingratitude of treading under foot the Son of God, and doing despite to the Spirit of grace? In fine, are you so lost to all sense of your own interest, as to be willing to forego the substantial comforts of religion here, and the transporting joys of heaven hereafter; and to endure the tremendous frowns of your provoked Judge on the great day of account, and the reproaches of your own guilty consciences in that place of torment prepared for the damned? God forbid that such should be your character! We hope better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.

We beseech you then, by the tenderness we flatter ourselves you still have for us; by the good will you owe to your Christian friends who pity you and pray for you; by the mercies of God, the bowels of Christ, and the compassions of the ever-blessed Spirit; by all, in a word, that is dear to you here and hereafter; to consider these things. “Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”

THE END.

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